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**Against a Mahāyāna Absolute: Why Absolutism Need Not Be a
Conclusion of Mahāyāna Philosophy**

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This work will argue that Mahāyāna philosophy need not result in endorsement of some cosmic Absolute in the vein of the Advaitin *ātman-Brahman*. Scholars such as Bhattacharya, Albahari and Murti argue that the Buddha at no point denied the existence of a cosmic *ātman*, and instead only denied a localised, individual *ātman* (what amounts to a *jīva*). The idea behind this, then, is that the Buddha was in effect an Advaitin, analysing experience and advocating liberation in an Advaitin sense: through a rejection of the individual *ātman* and knowledge (*jñāna*) of and immersion into the universal *ātman-Brahman*.

I will explore how different religious traditions define and shape the Absolute according to their own religious convictions, illustrating a divergence in conception from the very start, before exploring key differences between the Advaitin conception of the Absolute as put forth by Śāṅkara and as defended by Bhattacharya in *The Ātman-Brahman in Ancient Buddhism*. I then challenge Bhattacharya's claims that *prajñāpāramitā* literature necessarily endorses the *ātman-Brahman* and that Mahāyāna philosophies reorientate Buddhists towards the truth of the *ātman-Brahman*.

I do this by arguing that there are viable interpretations of Vasubandhu's Yogācāra and Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka that do not advocate such a belief, that *prajñāpāramitā* literature can be viewed as a project in episteme rather than ontology, and that we need not find a ground of the same sort as the *ātman-Brahman* in the Buddhist flux of experience. I conclude by showing that whilst Absolutism is a theme in some schools of Buddhism, it need not be – contra Bhattacharya – the conclusion of two major Mahāyāna philosophies.

विद्यातुराणां न सुखं न निद्रा

For those in pursuit of knowledge, there is neither comfort nor sleep

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AKBh</i>	<i>Abhidharmakośabhāṣya</i> of Vasubandhu
<i>AsPP</i>	<i>Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitāsūtra</i>
<i>BG</i>	<i>Bhagavad Gītā</i>
<i>DN</i>	<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>
<i>G</i>	<i>Guide to the Perplexed</i> of Maimonides
<i>MHK</i>	<i>Madhyamakahṛdayakārikās</i> of Bhāvaviveka
<i>MMK</i>	<i>Mūlamadhyamakakārikā</i> of Nāgārjuna
<i>MT</i>	<i>Mystical Theology</i> of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite
<i>NKJV</i>	Holy Bible, New King James Version
<i>SN</i>	<i>Saṃyutta Nikāya</i>
<i>TSK/TSN</i>	<i>Trisvabhāvakārikā/Trisvabhāvanirdeśa</i> of Vasubandhu
<i>Ud.</i>	<i>Udāna</i> of the <i>Khuddaka Nikāya</i>
<i>VV</i>	<i>Vigrahavyāvartanī</i> of Nāgārjuna

Introduction

This work is primarily an attempt to defend Mahāyāna philosophy broadly construed against the claim that it *ought* to result in absolutism, understood here and throughout this thesis as the belief that there is an Absolute or unconditioned Being that is the foundation of conditioned existences. There are, of course no shortage of examples of absolutist thinking within the wide range of Mahāyāna thought, and scholars such as Kamaleswar Bhattacharya have seized upon such examples in an attempt to argue that Buddhist thought is, at its heart, focused on bringing its practitioners to knowledge of the absolute *ātman-Brahman*; the ultimate identity of souls and the foundational principle, as understood by adherents of the Advaita or non-dualist form of Vedānta. Indeed, Bhattacharya's *Ātman-Brahman in Ancient Buddhism* caused quite a stir for advancing precisely this claim. Its central thesis is that the Buddha did not deny the cosmic *ātman-Brahman*, instead only denying the ultimate reality of the individual *ātman*, or *jīva* (2015: 7; 13; 23; 32). This would make the *anātman* doctrine that has become synonymous with Buddhism as understood today either a non-original feature added later by Buddhist scholastics, or an original feature that has been misinterpreted and misunderstood.¹ It would also mean that Buddhism is at its heart a variant of Vedānta.

I will not spend much time discussing the ways in which some Buddhist schools of thought do indeed endorse absolutism: Bhattacharya already makes clear that this is sometimes the case. Instead, I will focus my efforts on explaining why it *does not need to be* the case. This work is

¹ Bhattacharya seems to think that the second applies, though there is some disagreement in recent scholarship as to whether the Buddha advocated *anātman* at all. See Wynne (2009) for more.

thus a response to a subtle claim made in Bhattacharya's book, namely that it is the Mahāyāna schools 'which put things right' (2015: 39) in returning the Buddhist focus away from a doctrine of selflessness (*anātmavāda*) to the absolutism of the *ātman-Brahman*. I will defend the thesis that absolutism need not be a conclusion of Mahāyāna philosophy, and I intend to argue for this thesis as follows.

First, I assess some conceptions of the Absolute according to different religious and philosophical traditions, arguing that there is no single account of an Absolute that fully coheres across multiple religious traditions, and so we ought to be clear precisely what sort of absolute we are advocating (or not!) when discussing the Absolute. I argue that whilst ineffability is common to mystical accounts of the Absolute (insofar as a mystic can give an account of an ineffable Absolute), there are nevertheless many metaphysical assumptions and assignations that vary wildly dependent on the tradition under examination. Consequently, it is not enough to assume that it is the very same Absolute that is being experienced in each case simply because mystics report some sort of ineffable experience. It could be the case, for example, that mystics have simply achieved a psychological state that needs no attribution of metaphysical priority, or indeed any metaphysical import at all. My overarching argument in this section is twofold: first, that there are so many differences that are brought up so frequently when discussing the Absolute according to different traditions that it barely makes sense to assume that they are all talking about the same phenomenon or set of phenomena. Second, that the Buddha would deny all such 'accounts' of the Absolute. Consequently, we ought to exercise caution when attempting to draw parallels across traditions.

Section 2 sees me address the question of *ātman-Brahman* in Buddhism in three ways. First, I give a survey of Bhattacharya's argument, offering some alternative readings of his sources and referring to such Mahāyāna titans as Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu in an attempt to delineate what Bhattacharya sees as a necessarily monistic interpretation from what *could be*, if read with some degree of nuance and awareness of the wider context, simple examples of *upāya*. I argue that Bhattacharya overstates his case and that in choosing to leave *ātman* untranslated in some key passages, he obscures the meaning therein. It is here that I introduce Vasubandhu for the first time and use his conception of the three natures (*trisvabhāva*) to explain an apparently absolutist extract. I further argue that more instances interpreted by Bhattacharya to support an Absolute can be interpreted alternatively to support the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman*. I end by outlining Bhattacharya's position that *anātman* is actually synonymous with *paramātman*, and that because the Buddha knows the nature of all *dharma*s (phenomena) to be *anātman*, he has in reality arrived at the pinnacle of understanding: *anātman* is the *ātman-Brahman*.

From here, I give an outline of Abhidharmic *dharma* theory and explain that I think that Bhattacharya is mistaken to equate the emptiness of *dharma*s with the *ātman-Brahman*. Bhattacharya's position seems to be that if *dharma*s are impersonal, then it is precisely this impersonality that constitutes their true intrinsic nature. In such an instance, emptiness (*śūnyatā*) would effectively be the *svabhāva* of all phenomena. I then ask if this is a feasible position to take and conclude it might be, depending on how Bhattacharya understands a *dharma* to function. I argue that he must follow Nāgārjuna in asserting their emptiness in order to avoid issues around there being many *svabhāvas* instead of just one: the impersonal *ātman-Brahman*. The problems with this position will provide the basis for sections 5 and 6.

Section 2 ends with a discussion around a potential early Buddhist rejection of the *Brahman*. Reading the *Brahmanimantanika Sutta* in a certain way sees some strong parallels appear between the *Upaniṣadic Brahman* and the world of Baka-Brahmā that is visited by the Buddha. I argue that the Buddha purposely eschews all ideas of immersion into a state of being where existence is permanent and there is no aging, no death or rebirth. The Buddha demonstrates that his mind is more powerful than that of Baka-Brahmā, and employs his superior mental powers to disappear from the powerful deity, demonstrating that the realm of Baka-Brahmā – which relies on a specific mental state to enter – is actually transient and subject to all of the mundane dissatisfactions that Baka-Brahmā thinks do not apply. This reading ties in, I argue, with a sermon detailed in the *Mūlapariyāya Sutta*, where the Buddha explicitly denies that anything comes forth from ‘unbinding’, which can be understood as the liberated state. If this liberated state is to be the *ātman-Brahman*, we would be at a loss to account for the existence of the world if, as the Buddha argues, nothing comes from it or it is not immanent in the way that the *ātman-Brahman* is required to be.

Section 3 addresses the ways in which it might be claimed that we can know this elusive *ātman-Brahman*. I begin by examining how the *Upaniṣads* talk about the transcendent *ātman-Brahman* and why scriptural descriptions of it are valuable despite being ultimately inapplicable. The position of Śaṅkara is that scripture is unique in its ability to assert the existence of the *ātman-Brahman*; without this, we would not know to search for it. This is because, thinks Śaṅkara, the *ātman-Brahman* is not an object to be discovered by empirical means. This raises the question, then, how we might ‘know’ the *ātman-Brahman* at all given that its existence is so radically other: we might even say that it is ‘radically inaccessible’ (Tillemans, 1999: 29), and so

cannot ever be discovered through empirical experience alone or indeed through reason alone. Śaṅkara attempts to deal with this issue by prioritising the authority of the scriptures themselves (*śruti*) and their verbalisation (by a *guru*/teacher; *śabda*). I then compare the Buddhist recourse to scripture, which I conclude is much weaker than that of the Advaitin, with thinkers such as Dharmakīrti acknowledging that scriptural inferences always carry some risk of uncertainty and should be avoided wherever possible: this is not a position that appears to be shared by Śaṅkara.

The focus then moves onto the significance of the *pramāṇas* to both Śaṅkara and Nāgārjuna, discussing some superficial similarities and accounting for the significant differences in the role of *pramāṇa* and scriptural authority (a type of *pramāṇa* for Śaṅkara). I go on to conclude that Nāgārjuna has no use at all for any *pramāṇas*, developing this argument with recourse to the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, explaining why I believe it to be the case that for Nāgārjuna, anti-essentialism and anti-foundationalism are paramount: he believes that such things render liberation impossible. This logic should extend to any notions of *Brahman*. I then argue that whilst both Śaṅkara and Nāgārjuna ought to agree that if the *pramāṇas* have any use at all, it is only in terms of the conventional, the fundamental Advaitin reliance on scriptural establishment of the *ātman-Brahman* means that they in effect *do* make some sort of ultimate point: the *ātman-Brahman* is ultimately existent. It is the *only* existent. This is something that Nāgārjuna believes to be impossible.

The section concludes with the introduction of a discussion of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). I argue that the point of this concept is to remove *all* conceptual constructions/proliferations (*prapañca*) and metaphysical views/positions (*dṛṣṭi*) – including those of ‘ultimate’ realities or

truths. The aim here is purely soteriological: Nāgārjuna is not particularly concerned with providing some account of the makeup of the world. He is instead concerned with adapting the way in which we look upon the world so that we may stem our various dissatisfactions (*duḥkha*).

In section 4, some similarities are introduced between Advaitin doctrine and that of the Mādhyamikas, leaning on Frank Whaling's (1979) account of Śaṅkara's relationship with the Buddhist doctrines of his time. I spend some time examining the close similarities between both Śaṅkara and Nāgārjuna's conceptions of conventional and ultimate, a distinction that seems to have been absent from Vedānta until the time of Śaṅkara (Nicholson, 2007:531), before moving on to a survey of Śaṅkara's understanding of some other Buddhist doctrines. I note that there is either a wilful or an accidental conflation of divergent doctrines belonging to separate Buddhist schools. I suggest that this conflation may well have been an intentional attempt to portray the Buddha as confused and inconsistent by showing him to propound three separate, incompatible doctrines (Śaṅkara, 2011: 428).

The section continues with the introduction of some Buddhist doctrinal positions, a move that I hope will demonstrate why Śaṅkara thought these Buddhists to propound theories incompatible with his own (a point with which Bhattacharya must disagree). In order to do this, I discuss the Vaibhāṣika doctrine of possession, noting that their belief in ultimately existent atoms (*dharma*s), each possessing a *svabhāva*, precludes Śaṅkara from identifying with them in any way. It also precludes the Vaibhāṣikas themselves from endorsing an *ātman-Brahman*, for they already have an atomic account of the fundamentals of existence. The next step is to discuss the Sautrāntika response to the doctrine of possession, which hinges upon a rejection of the

Vaibhāṣika belief that a *svabhāva* is ultimately existent in the past, present, and future. The Sautrāntika response – devised by Vasubandhu – posits radical momentariness of *dharma*s, whereby their existence is wholly constituted by their causal activity (*svalakṣaṇa*). In this case, the *dharma* is no longer basic, but rather its causal efficacy is basic. A *svalakṣaṇa* can only manifest in the present, and so this in theory dispenses with the problematic endorsement of *dharma*s that exist eternally. I explain why Vasubandhu thinks that this account solves some fundamental Vaibhāṣika problems and provides a deliberate rejection of a fundamental ground of experience, accounting for ‘direct and indirect causal efficacy in the face of momentariness and the absence of a unifying substratum’ (Cox, 1995: 96). I go on to argue that Vasubandhu – like Nāgārjuna – is concerned with denying that there are immutable ultimate entities, explaining how he recharacterises *svabhāva* from immutable essence denoting ultimacy to a useful fiction that is ultimately unreal: a *svabhāva* is no more than an *appearance* or mental construction (*parikalpita*), and so lacks ultimacy.

Next, I extrapolate Vasubandhu’s use of *svabhāva* and introduce his ideas surrounding change and the denial of *ātman*. Here I continue the claim made earlier that although Vasubandhu uses the term ‘*svabhāva*’, he does so in a specific way, viz. in a manner that does not bestow it with ultimate reality. Thus, his *trīsvabhāva* doctrine does not endorse a trilogy of ultimately real entities, but accounts for a tripartite way of seeing phenomena, each of which can be understood to be conventional rather than ultimate. I proceed to give accounts of the similarities in method of the Yogācāra and the Madhyamaka, noting that whilst some differences can be noted in the ways in which words such as ‘*śūnyatā*’ are used, both traditions aim at an epistemological realisation; the realisation that there are no permanent, immutable, ultimate

entities. The argument hinges on my interpretation of Nāgārjuna as utterly unconcerned with propagating a metaphysics by which the world can be explained. I argue, then, that both Yogācāra philosophy and Madhyamaka philosophy deny that there can be a super-real ultimate substratum, despite consciousness being a type of ground in Yogācāra. Importantly, this ground is not of the same sort as the *ātman-Brahman*, viz. as the material and efficient cause of the universe, immanent in all things, as a ground of *Being*. Instead, it is a ground of *experience*, which is to say that it provides the basis for all of our experience and cognition. Our consciousness does this without recourse to one single ultimate substance. Consciousness is intersubjective, and each consciousness is to be understood as distinct, not as a misapprehended plurality imposed over a single entity. In other words, consciousness ought not to be understood in the way that the *jīva* is understood by Bhattacharya. I specifically refer to Lusthaus' (2002: 489) argument that the Yogācāra acknowledges multiple distinct consciousnesses, not simply the misapprehension of consciousnesses that all have their nexus in a *Brahman*-like substratum. This is a claim quite different to that advanced by Bhattacharya in support of the *ātman-Brahman*! Further, I argue that as a 'real' entity as understood by Vasubandhu requires an entity be momentary and not eternal, the *ātman-Brahman* cannot be considered a candidate for 'reality' in the Yogācāra tradition, much less be considered the *only* reality.

Following this, the discussion moves to the Advaitin doctrine of *māyā* and its (im)plausibility as an account of the appearance of plurality and action in the world (we misapprehend the true nature of *ātman-Brahman* owing to *māyā*). I then measure this against the Buddhist account of delusion, which has its roots in measured analysis and reason. I conclude that any Buddhist that takes seriously dependent origination, reason, and analysis simply cannot

accept the doctrine of *māyā* as the answer to problematic questions regarding *Brahman*, action and difference.

The final part of section 4 focuses on a discussion of Yogācāra as idealism. If it is the case that Yogācāra is idealistic and endorses only one consciousness, then the claim that this Mahāyāna school outright endorses absolutism might well be warranted. I borrow heavily from Lusthaus and argue that should his characterisation of Yogācāra be correct, then we cannot reasonably state that Yogācāra is idealism, or at least not as we commonly understand the term. I contrast Lusthaus' argument that Yogācāra is not idealism with divergent views, including the position of Trivedi (2005), who argues that Yogācāra might best be understood as a type of 'epistemic idealism', whereby it would not make any ontological claims. It would then instead 'claim that we know things not as they really are, as claim epistemic realists, but rather as they are given to us by our ideas, our concepts, and categories' (2005: 232). That is to say that we cannot know things *in themselves*, only as they are *represented to us*. Trivedi, like Lusthaus, does not think that consciousness somehow manufactures a mind-dependent world (2005: 236), and so eschews the idea that Vasubandhu's thought and the Yogācāra more generally can be classified as metaphysical idealism. Following this line of thought, I argue that Vasubandhu is, like Nāgārjuna, concerned not with building a metaphysical system, but instead with providing some sort of roadmap to deconstructing our mistaken views. I suggest that the point of the Yogācārin method is *nirvikalpaka-jñāna*, or *non-discriminating cognition*, a type of awareness that does not impose onto the world or grasp out at it. The section is concluded with a brief discussion of an excerpt from the *Ch'eng wei-shih lun* (translated by Lusthaus) which appears to

deny that to assert a *paramātmā* in the name of the Yogācāra is to spectacularly misunderstand both the aim of Yogācāra and the method it employs.

Section 5 involves some examinations of tricky Pāli/Sanskrit terminology, beginning with *dharmakāya/dharmakāya*. This is a word that has many connotations in the Buddhist corpus, and in my experience, the favoured meaning imparted to it generally depends on who is asked. There is a trend in some Buddhist literature and some Buddhist schools to interpret the *dharmakāya* as an absolute; it is on this view a realm in which the Buddha always exists, an unconditioned, pure, metaphysically privileged realm not unlike that of the *ātman-Brahman*. Entry to this realm, it is thought, *is* liberation. Surely, though, this would be unsatisfactory to somebody like Nāgārjuna, who expended so much time and effort denying the possibility of ultimate entities (and so realms)? I suggest that Nāgārjuna might opt to interpret *dharmakāya* in an alternative manner, perhaps as an attribute of the Buddha rather than the Buddha's *Being*. I then cite Harrison's (1992) argument that (limited) uses of *dharmakāya* in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitāsūtra* ought to be interpreted adjectivally, and so as some attribute possessed by the Buddha rather than as some external thing in itself.

There follows a contextual discussion of the potential absolutist interpretations of *buddha*-body and *saṅgha*-body, which are both mentioned in the same context as the *dharmakāya*-body in the *AsPP*. It is difficult to understand how the *saṅgha* might be thought of as a transcendental entity. It makes more sense to think of the *saṅgha*-body as the 'collected qualities of the *saṅgha*', or the totality of qualities possessed by monastics – the principles of the wider religious family, if you will. Similarly, if *buddha*-body is to be understood transcendently, then

what separates it from the *dharmakāya*? Thus *buddha*-body might simply refer to the collected qualities of all *buddhas* as ‘revealed’ in the *Perfection of Wisdom*. These are not necessarily equivalent with the *Dharma*, but exemplify the personal qualities of those enlightened minds that have fully understood and eventually come to ‘live’ the *Dharma*.

I then spend some time with Xing (2005), who argues that if we claim that the *dharmakāya* of all *buddhas* is identical, all we are really claiming is that every *buddha* manifests or embodies the *Dharma* in the same way, presumably because they have all acquired the same qualities and the same insight into the world. I conclude by surmising that we can avoid absolutism if we interpret such tricky words with some nuance and an awareness of their uses in early Buddhist literature. For a Mādhyamika seeking to avoid absolutism, then, my contention is that the *dharmakāya* refers to little more than the qualities exemplified, taught, and lived out by the Buddha. There is no transcendental aspect required.

Next, I spend a short amount of time discussing how we might understand words like *brahmakāya* in a similar vein to *dharmakāya*. I follow Xing in arguing that *brahmakāya* can be understood as a synonym for *dharmakāya* (Xing, 2005: 71), likely for pedagogical reasons. I argue that Bhattacharya’s assertion that *brahmakāya*, *brahmabhūta* and so on are always intended to be taken transcendently does not stand up to scrutiny because each word can be understood in simpler, more mundane ways that still cohere with wider Buddhist doctrine.

There is then a short discussion about how a Buddhist concerned with denying ultimacy and absolutism might want to interpret ‘*tathāgata*’ and *tathāgatagarbha*. The thrust of this subsection is to provide an alternative interpretation of the *tathāgata* that does not rely on the

idea of an essential principle underpinning all existence (akin to the *ātman-Brahman*). I discuss pertinent extracts in the *MMK* that appear to refute any ultimate difference between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, and advance the argument that Nāgārjuna cannot and does not endorse the existence of an ultimate substratum like the *ātman-Brahman*. The *tathāgatagarbha* literature should not then be taken at face value; we need to read carefully and closely in order to determine if there are any absolutist connotations, or if the literature is simply aimed at swaying those who might already hold a substance-view over to the Buddhist cause. It is well known that the Buddha ‘knew his audience’ and often talked in ways appropriate to them rather than fully appropriate to his teachings – that part would come later. It is my contention that it is at least plausible that the *tathāgatagarbha* literature occupies this sort of space within the Mahāyāna corpus.

The section continues with the argument that the point of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra praxis is not to cling to ideas of existence or nonexistence, but rather to jettison these thought process to begin with. The idea is not to arrive at knowledge of some ultimately existent substratum akin to the *ātman-Brahman*, but to arrive at a point where we no longer impose any conceptualisations whatsoever on our experience. Finally, I add that the *tathāgatagarbha* literature might be understood in the same way as the *prajñāpāramitā* literature; as an *episteme*. This is to say that it does not want to build a prescriptive metaphysics, but instead aims at a ‘gradual’, progressional epistemic unfolding of Buddhist teachings. For essentialists, it seems that liberation is ontological. It involves entry into some ultimate realm or knowledge of some ready-made ultimate substratum (like the *ātman-Brahman*). For progressionalists, liberation is epistemological. *Prajñā* is that which brings about a *mental change*, and this change informs how

we interact with the world. If we interact without grasping, without imposition and appropriation, we might be said to be awakened. Taken this way, the *tathāgatagarbha* is not an Absolute, but is simply the active unfolding of this potential in a progressive manner. To talk of a person having *tathāgatagarbha* is then simply to talk of their having the potential to awaken.

The final section of this work focuses exclusively on how Nāgārjuna deals with the problem of absolute existence. I discuss those positions that take *śūnyatā* to be either an ultimate truth or an ultimate reality, arguing that Nāgārjuna is not attempting to give an account of reality – ultimate or otherwise – but rather an account of how we *experience* reality. He is thus developing a soteriological method that changes how we interact with the world in order to quell *duḥkha*. Consequently, I argue that the criticisms advanced by Burton (1999) are wrongheaded insofar as they attempt to deal metaphysically with a method that seeks to eschew all metaphysics. This theme continues in the next subsection, where I give an account of Nāgārjuna’s ‘use’ of metaphysics. I go on to argue that Nāgārjuna toys around with the metaphysical positions of his opponents only to illustrate their futility in the soteriological scheme that he advocates. He is simply talking to his audience in terms they understand before imploring them to abandon these concepts for the sake of their liberation.

If I am correct, then we ought to understand the ‘ultimate’ referred to by Nāgārjuna in conventional terms. Ultimacy then becomes a concept under which nothing really falls. It has a pragmatic use, allowing Nāgārjuna to delineate the highest conventional teachings from the mundane. The highest teachings are ‘ultimate’ insofar as they are the highest set of a wholly contingent bunch of teachings. It is with this in mind that I go on to argue that all Buddhist

teachings are contingent, and Nāgārjuna is, after all, putting forth Buddhist teachings relating to soteriology, not teachings relating to the nature of the universe. Even if he were, these teachings too would be contingent! I then demonstrate why it is the case that the Four Noble Truths are contingent, arguing that they could not arise without deluded minds and dissatisfaction. I borrow from Candrakīrti, Siderits and Katsura in accounting for conventionality as normal, everyday relations between semantic and cognitive aspects, an uncritical and mistaken way of interacting with the world. The next step is accounting for the value of referring to an ultimate that is itself not ultimately existent. On this, I argue that the ultimate truth so conceived by Nāgārjuna is a type of *upāya*: a useful way to think about things, but one that is ultimately to be abandoned as mere concept. The result of this path is, I suggest, the abandonment of metaphysics in favour of the experience of liberation: Nāgārjuna writes at *MMK* 25.24 that ‘the extinguishing of all cognition, the extinguishing of reification, is blissful’. This extinguishing of cognition must include notions of ultimacy.

In the final subsection, I conclude that given what has gone before, an ultimate designation is for Nāgārjuna actually a *conventional* designation. It is communicated within a necessarily conventional linguistic system and has no reality of its own. Its use is also distinctly conventional, viz. to designate dependent concepts. I cite and discuss various passages from the *MMK* to demonstrate that for Nāgārjuna, the denial of ultimacy holds from the top down and in every circumstance. There is simply no room for ultimate entities, ultimate realities or ultimate truths. In the majority of cases, even asking the question regarding ultimacy is mistaken and serves only to distract from the Buddhist path. The notion of ultimacy is then narrowly useful to Buddhists because it allows stark lines to be drawn regarding which teachings are useful and

which teachings are *very* useful. What is declared to be ultimate is rather the highest of the conventional teachings, but it cannot be ultimate in any sense that Nāgārjuna would recognise. Simply put, there is no place for ultimacy when we reach the summit of Madhyamaka praxis. It is yet another *prapañca*; another concept reified and to which we wrongly cling. Liberation, then, must consist in the abandonment of ultimates and the halting of conceptual cognition. It cannot consist in knowing the reality of the *ātman-Brahman*. As Nāgārjuna writes, ‘those who proclaim the real nature of the *ātman* and separate entities we do not consider experts in the Buddha’s teaching’ (*MMK* 10.16). It is my contention, then, that absolutism need not be a conclusion of Mahāyāna philosophy.

§1: Defining the Absolute

The notion of an Absolute is common to all of the world's major religions in one way or another, be it Islam's *tawhīd*, the Hindu *Brahman*, mystical Christianity's transcendent God,² the Jewish *elohút*, or the Buddhist *dharmakāya*.³ Most scholars agree that we in the West have the influence of Neoplatonism to thank for this development; such was its focus on mysticism, *gnosis* and the One (i.e. the Absolute). It is with the advent of Neoplatonism that we begin to see the primacy of a unitary principle underpinning all of reality. This unitary principle (the Good, the One, the First, or in a more modern vernacular, the Absolute) is assumed to be ontologically prior to the world which depends on it, and so it is a higher reality than that which is immediately available to us. Little wonder, then, that this idea crept into religion and divinity!⁴ The immediate

² Take, for example, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite's *via negativa* characterisation of the transcendent God:

We therefore maintain that the universal and transcendent Cause of all things is neither without being nor without life, nor without reason or intelligence; nor is He a body, nor has He form or shape, quality, quantity or weight; nor has He any localized, visible or tangible existence; He is not sensible or perceptible; nor is He subject to any disorder or inordination nor influenced by any earthly passion; neither is He rendered impotent through the effects of material causes and events; He needs no light; He suffers no change, corruption, division, privation or flux; none of these things can either be identified with or attributed unto Him.

(MT 4: 15)

³ The exact meaning of *dharmakāya* is contentious, and will be covered in more detail later (§5.1). However, one popular and enduring way to interpret it is as a necessary and primary underlying substrate that has been defiled and can be uncovered through diligent practice and meditation. Such an interpretation sees the *dharmakāya* as – if not technically a godhead – then as a similarly transcendent ultimate reality that can be accessed through *prajñā* (wisdom; insight into reality).

⁴ The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy provides an overview of the development of Neoplatonism and its ensuing influence on the theological and philosophical tapestries of various religions (Wildberg, 2016).

question is whether all these characterisations refer to the exact same thing, or whether there is some genuine variation. If there is difference and variation, how might this be accounted for? If it is the case that every religious tradition has the same conception of the Absolute, then why are there differing religious doctrines in the first place? The overarching question I want to address, though, is ‘what type of absolute did the Buddha deny?’, and so this section will examine some ways in which an absolute has been conceived across religious traditions.

In one sense, it seems relatively easy to answer at least parts of these questions: there are strong traditions of apophasis in relation to the Absolute (ultimate truth, the godhead, and so on) within each of the world’s major religions.⁵ This simply means that each religious tradition holds within itself schools of thought that hold the Absolute (godhead) to be ineffable; we cannot know the essence of it, or its ‘substance’ (Maimonides, *G* 1.58, p83) and so instead speak only of what the Absolute *is not*.⁶ This can be taken further still with the claim that the Absolute does not ‘exist’ in a meaningful sense. Whilst we exist and the objects that populate the world exist, the Absolute is so radically other that to speak of its ‘existence’ would be mistaken. As Fidler

⁵ Negative theology (*lahoot salbi*) has historically been a feature of the Islamic theological tapestry. Though not mystics (they were, in fact, rationalists), the al-mu‘tazilah are one example, believing that God ‘is not merely numerically one but also that he is a simple essence’, and so argue against the notion ‘that he has a body or any of the characteristics of bodies such as colour, form, movement and localization in space; hence he cannot be seen, in this world or the next’ (Robinson, 1998). Similarly, Schimmel refers to Bāyezīd, a Sufi mystic that adhered to ‘austere via negationis and constant mortification, by emptying himself of himself, until he had reached, at least for a moment, the world of absolute unity where, as he said, lover, beloved, and love are one’ (1975: 49). This is a clear example of the use of the negative method to achieve knowledge (gnosis) of or communion with the godhead.

⁶ Maimonides argues that ‘[i]n the contemplation of His essence, our comprehension and knowledge prove insufficient; in the examination of His works, how they necessarily result from His will, our knowledge proves to be ignorance, and in the endeavour to extol Him in words, all our efforts in speech are mere weakness and failure’ (*G* 58, p83).

puts it, 'God is above entity' (2002: 119, note 57). In this sense, we can say that most of the thinkers that utilise the negative method believe that there are transcendent truths, but that they lie beyond both existence (as we know it) and the intellect. This outlook typically qualifies such adherents as 'mystics'.⁷ We can find examples of the *via negativa* approach in Judaism through thinkers such as Maimonides, Christianity through such adherents as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite,⁸ Islam via sects like the Mu'tazilites, in the Kabbalah,⁹ Advaita Vedānta,¹⁰ and

⁷ The OED defines 'mystic' as 'any person who seeks by contemplation and self-surrender to obtain union with or absorption into God, or who believes in the spiritual apprehension of truths which are beyond the intellect; a person who has or seeks mystical experiences' ('mystic, n. and adj.' OED Online. Oxford University Press). This does not strictly apply to the Mu'tazilites, who tactically deployed the negative method in some circumstances, but were nevertheless fully committed to rationalism (and not mysticism).

⁸ Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite differs from other mystics insofar as where some mystics call for gnosis of the Absolute (*jñāna* is cognate with gnosis in the Indian religious traditions, but usually has a more limited scope), he refers to the 'Divine Darkness', an *agnosia*. The Shrine of Wisdom editors define as 'a transcendent unknowing — a super-knowledge not obtained by means of the discursive reason' (MT 1, p9). On this, Dionysius the Areopagite writes:

...in the diligent exercise of mystical contemplation, leave behind the senses and the operations of the intellect, and all things sensible and intellectual, and all things in the world of being and non-being, that thou mayest arise by unknowing towards the union, as far as is attainable, "with Him who transcends all being and all knowledge. For by the unceasing and absolute renunqatiop [sic: renunciation?] of thyself and of all things thou mayest be borne on high, through pure and entire self-abnegation, into the superessential Radiance of the Divine Darkness.

(MT 1: 9)

⁹ Wolfson (1994: VII) cites Azriel, a famed Jewish mystic, on the nature of *Ein Sof* (eternity, the unending), the Kabbalistic conception of God prior to any self-manifestation. Although using some positive predicates to describe *Ein Sof*, Azriel goes on to say that any comprehension of *Ein Sof* is achieved purely 'through the negative way'. He would likely argue, as do Śaṅkara and countless other mystics, that these positive predicate do not ultimately say anything of the Absolute, but instead serve to simply orient our minds toward it so that we may be placed on the right path, so to speak. Once on this path, it is the negative method declaring that which the Absolute is not that can (perhaps counter-intuitively) furnish us with knowledge of the Absolute.

¹⁰ In his commentary to *Brahmasūtra* 1.1.3, Swami Vireswarananda writes that 'Brahman has no form etc. and so cannot be cognised by direct perception. Again in the absence of inseparable characteristics, as smoke is of fire, it cannot be established by inference or analogy (Upamāṇa)' (Vireswarananda, 2014: 24). He also cites Śaṅkara as

indeed Buddhism.¹¹ Though of vastly different religious traditions with different methods of worship, different metaphysical conceptions and assumptions, and even different conceptions of ‘God’, each tradition nevertheless contains adherents that – to some degree or another – advocate the *via negativa* as a means by which to ‘know’ God. I will spend some time looking at how thinkers from each tradition do this in the hope that we can flesh out some similarities and indeed some differences in how conceptualisations of the godhead are dealt with.

Maimonides puts the ineffability of the Absolute in no uncertain terms:

I would observe that,--as has already been shown--God's existence is absolute, that it includes no composition, as will be proved, and that we comprehend only the fact that He exists, not His essence. Consequently it is a false assumption to hold that He has any

referring to the *Kena Upaniṣad* (either 1.3 or 1.4 depending on which version is used) when arguing that Brahman cannot be an object of thought or indeed of the act of knowing (Vireswarananda, 2014: 28). So *Kena Upaniṣad* 1.3/1.4 (my translation):

*na tatra cakṣur gacchati na vā gacchati no mano /
na vidmo na vijānimo yathaitadanuśiṣyāt //*
*anyadeva tad veditādatho aviditādadhi /
iti śuśrūma purveṣāṃ ye nastad vyācacakṣire //*

Not there goes the eye, nor goes speech, nor the mind; we do not know It, we do not know how one might teach This.
It is distinct from the known; It is above the unknown. Thus we have heard from the ancients who explained It to us.

Vireswarananda goes further still, arguing in the commentary to *Brahmasūtra* 1.1.4 that knowledge (specifically ‘knowledge of Brahman’) cannot be said to depend on an activity of the mind because ‘the result of action is either creation, modification, purification or attainment. None of these is applicable to the knowledge of Brahman, which is the same thing as Liberation’ (Vireswarananda, 2014: 29). For Śāṅkara, if liberation were something that could be created or modified, it could not be permanent (Vireswarananda, 2014: 29). As liberation is synonymous with knowledge of *Brahman*, this is an unacceptable conclusion for Śāṅkara as it first undermines the very point of Advaitin praxis (why spend time and effort reaching liberation only for it to have the same result as *saṃsāra*?), and second undermines the idea of *Brahman* as the permanent, unchanging efficient cause of the universe.

¹¹ Murti writes of the *dharmakāya*: ‘The Cosmical body is [the Buddha’s] essential nature; it is one with the Absolute’ before asserting that ‘[a]s the Dharmakāya, Buddha fully realises his identity with the Absolute (dharmaṭā, śūnyatā) and unity (samatā) with all beings’ (2016: 284). This is important and will be developed in detail later.

positive attribute: for He does not possess existence in addition to His essence.

(G 1.58: 82)

This ineffability of the Absolute seems to be a consistent feature occurring at various points across different religious traditions, and it is no different here for Maimonides. We can see that he spends considerable effort detailing why it must be the case that God has no attributes. Simply put, for a being to possess an attribute of any kind, Maimonides thinks that there must be a duality involved, viz. that of the attribute itself and the attribute bearer. In order to speak of attributes, we need to speak of something that *has* those attributes rather than something that simply *is*. Maimonides' opposition to this is simple: if it is the case that God has attributes, then God has parts; having parts means that God is not a simple unity.¹² The question of attributes and their relation to the divine (godhead) is a theme that is a consistent feature of many religious systems, most of which posit their own answers. Not content with denying positive attributes to God, Maimonides goes further still, explaining why it is the case that we must not predicate any attribute whatsoever of God. Arguing against such predications, Maimonides (G 1.58, p83) writes that

Those who read the present work are aware that, notwithstanding all the efforts of the mind, we can obtain no knowledge of the essence of the heavens--a revolving substance which has been measured by us in spans and cubits, and examined even as regards the proportions of the several spheres to each other and respecting most of their motions--although we know that they must consist of matter and form; but the matter not being the same as sublunary matter, we can only describe the heavens in terms expressing negative properties, but not in terms denoting positive qualities.

¹² 'God' here – and in the following discussion – is synonymous with 'Absolute'.

In this instance, it is clear that like other mystics, Maimonides thinks that ultimately, to assign *any* attribute to God – positive or negative – is to get it wrong. This is very simply ‘because we do not know [God’s] substance’ (G 1.58), and we cannot make true statements about that which we do not know. However, given that we somehow need to orientate ourselves toward God, using negative attributes to do this is generally better than our using (and inevitably reifying) positive attributes. After all, how might one orientate himself or herself toward the divine if nobody could ever describe that which they are orientating towards? Communication of divinity is vital to religious praxis even if we cannot *ultimately* rely on the things said in such communications. The fact remains however, that in the final analysis *nothing at all* can be attributed to God: God transcends language and linguistic designation. Indeed, ‘in the endeavour to extol Him in words, all our efforts in speech are mere weakness and failure’ (G 58, p83). This is a position that exists elsewhere in the religious landscape – it is, in fact, common across traditions, though its significance and impact varies in each different religious framework.

In his commentary to the *Brahmasūtra* (also known as the *Vedāntasūtra*), Swami Vireswarananda¹³ – an Advaitin and interpreter of Śaṅkara – writes:

The scriptures, therefore, never describe Brahman as this or that, but only negate manifoldness which is false, in texts like, “There is no manifoldness in It” (*Ka.* 2.4.11), and “He who sees manifoldness in It goes from death to death” (*Ibid.* 2.4.10).

(Vireswarananda, 2014: 28)

¹³ Vireswarananda was the tenth president of the Ramakrishna Math. A student of Brahmananda, who was himself a direct disciple of Ramakrishna, Vireswarananda was a prolific writer and translator of Sanskrit texts, including the commentaries of both Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja on the *Brahmasūtra*.

We can understand *Brahman* as the godhead or the ultimately existent Absolute that underpins all of reality (and so to this degree we can say that it is analogous to the idea of God held by Maimonides). Vireswarananda is very clearly mirroring the thoughts of Maimonides: ultimately, ascribing any sort of attribute onto the Absolute is mistaken. Rather, to know the Absolute is to negate ‘manifoldness which is false’, viz. to realise a unity and simplicity in the *Brahman*.

Śaṅkara also denies the appropriateness of ascribing properties to the Absolute, but acknowledges the requirement to speak around it in order to orientate people *inwards* as opposed to *outwards*. In his commentary to *Brahmasūtra* 1.1.4, he writes:

But what then, it will be asked, is the purport of these sentences which, at any rate have the appearance of injunctions; such as, ‘The Self is to be seen, to be heard about?’ – They have the purport, we reply, of diverting (men) from the objects of natural activity. For when a man acts intent on external things, and only anxious to attain the objects of his desire and eschew the objects of his aversion, and does not thereby reach the highest aim of man although desirous of attaining it; such texts as the one quoted divert him from the objects of natural activity and turn the stream of his thoughts on the inward (the highest) Self.

(Śaṅkara, 2011: 35-36)

Here we can see that for Śaṅkara, the significance of the scriptures when referring to Brahman’s attributes is not so much to describe the *Brahman*, but to elicit enough of an interest from the reader or listener that they decide to eschew material things and pursue their own knowledge of *Brahman*. This is primarily because knowledge of the material world does not translate to knowledge of *Brahman*, and like Maimonides, Śaṅkara recognises that despite the godhead being ultimately beyond attribution and description, people still need to be able to say something about it in order to orient themselves toward it in a meaningful (and hopefully

successful) manner. The point is really that knowing the empirical world is not sufficient to know the Absolute. It is nevertheless the case that knowing the Absolute endows one with the knowledge that the empirical world that relies upon it is an illusory manifestation¹⁴ (*māyā*), clouding the true nature of the Absolute (in this case, *Brahman*). Śaṅkara elaborates on this point in his commentary to *Brahmasūtra* 1.1.2, writing that

Brahman is not an object of the senses, it has no connection with those other means of knowledge. For the senses have, according to their nature, only external things for their objects, not Brahman. If Brahman were an object of the senses, we might perceive that the world is connected with Brahman as its effect; but as the effect only (i.e. the world) is perceived, it is impossible to decide (through perception) whether it is connected with Brahman or something else. Therefore the Sūtra under discussion is not meant to propound inference (as the means of knowing Brahman), but rather to set forth a Vedānta-text.

(Śaṅkara, 2011: 19)

I hope that some recurrent themes are becoming obvious. Despite their drastically different religious frameworks and traditions, both Maimonides and Śaṅkara believe that a negative or apophatic approach to the divine is the only one that can make sense in the created world. Some knowledge of the Absolute is possible, but not through the usual means of interaction with the empirical world or the concepts it engenders. For Śaṅkara, it is in a complete knowledge of the absolute that liberation consists: we fundamentally *are* the Absolute, and once we uncover this latent knowledge – a form of self-knowledge – we gain knowledge of our

¹⁴ This is not to say that the empirical world is ‘unreal’ as such, but rather that its true essential character, the *Brahman*, is obscured within it.

fundamental identity as *Brahman*.¹⁵ This experience of a transcendental (ultimate) intuition of *Brahman* – *brahmānubhava* – can be categorised as a *mystical experience* precisely because it is transcendental knowledge of (and so experience of) divinity that is said to be incomprehensible when viewed through the empirical lens of the conventional world of *māyā* (Preti, 2014: 724). But what of a thinker like Maimonides? Can Maimonides ‘know’ the divine in the way that Śaṅkara can (at least in principle)? Such questions are relevant to the wider question here, because it is not enough for each religious discipline to conceive of a godhead, or an absolute divinity: their characters might be radically different; we might not be able to *know* their characters at all.

These differentiations might then suggest that despite each religious tradition having some idea of an absolute, the ideas are not identical. Even if every tradition agrees that there is some ineffable Absolute, we are not at all justified in arguing that this shared quality (of ineffability) means that each conception of the Absolute is identical in nature. More to the point, for the Buddhist, we are not at all justified in taking as a matter of faith that *there is* an Absolute. This is very simply because we do not know that this is the case; indeed, we cannot know that this is the case. In the case of Maimonides, there is at least some disagreement over whether or

¹⁵ For Śaṅkara we always were the *Brahman*, we just did not quite know it. Upon realising the transcendent intuitive self-knowledge that we *are Brahman* (*brahmānubhava*), we become liberated because we finally know – *really* know – that we are one with *Brahman*. There are no more delusions, illusions and so on; we settle in the ‘bliss’ (*ānanda*) of the *Brahman*. In this sense, it is a process of becoming.

not his philosophy allows us to 'know' the Absolute.¹⁶ On the face of things, Maimonides is committed to a position that must always deny that the essence of the Absolute is in any sense knowable. This position is *prima facie* contrary to somebody like Śaṅkara that thinks that we *can* know the Absolute (because, ultimately, we *are* the Absolute); we just cannot speak of it accurately in normal linguistic terms. Maimonides, then, thinks that whilst we can see the effects of God's existence – the 'back' of God¹⁷ – we cannot know God's essence. In the exchange at Exodus 33, God does not deign to tell us *why* we cannot know his essence ('face'), only that nobody may do so and live.

Maimonides stands in agreement with Śaṅkara on the one hand: both agree that there is an Absolute from which all existence stems. This is a significant point of agreement. The points of disagreement, though, are so stark as to seem insurmountable. First, Maimonides appears to

¹⁶ Blumenthal (2009: VII) laments that Maimonides has been codified in Jewish thought as a sort of 'Jewish Kant', a rationalist that in many ways pre-empted modern rationalism and 'modern scientific spirit'. This is mistaken, argues Blumenthal, because Maimonides expends considerable time and effort utilising mystical language. On this, Blumenthal writes that '[i]t cannot be happenstance that Maimonides uses them; rather, he clearly intends to allude to a spiritual experience and reality which, though rooted in previous intellectual activity, transcends that realm' (2009: XII). Further to this, Blumenthal opines that Maimonides advocates three stages of 'true spirituality', the third of which culminates in 'a condition in which a person is in extended bliss' that is 'not a fleeting moment in human spiritual life but an ongoing state of mystical consciousness' (2009: XII-XIII). I do not presume to address the merits of Blumenthal's arguments here, rather I mention this only to illustrate that there is some deviation from the consensus that Maimonides was primarily concerned with reconciling rationalism with Jewish philosophy.

¹⁷ Maimonides takes this view from Exodus 33.19-23 (NKJV):

Then He said, "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." But He said, "You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live." And the Lord said, "Here is a place by Me, and you shall stand on the rock. So it shall be, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by. Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen."

be committed to the maxim that we cannot know the Absolute – we can only know its effects. Perhaps this speaks to his characterisation as the ‘Jewish Kant’. Second, Maimonides certainly does not think that we – that is, humanity – are microcosms of the Absolute. We have already seen that for Śaṅkara, we are all the *Brahman* and our individual existence as *jīva* is nothing but illusion. It would be a sacrilege to Maimonides to suggest that we *are God*. Clearly, then, we have a situation where both Śaṅkara and Maimonides agree that there is an Absolute. And yet this is not sufficient for both to agree that they are talking about the very same thing: each one’s version of this Absolute is fundamentally different.

I am inclined to think, then, that whilst variant religious traditions might agree in abstracto that there is an Absolute Being, they fundamentally differ on the character of said Absolute. An ever-present conception seems to be that of grounding (i.e. the Absolute Being is, in some way, the *grounds* of reality), but this still tells us relatively little. *How* is this Absolute Being a grounding principle? What does it mean for this principle to be a grounds for reality, and in what way does it exist? I expect that in terms of Maimonides and Śaṅkara, neither would acknowledge the other’s ‘Absolute’ as a true representation of what the Absolute is: Śaṅkara because he thinks we can *know exactly* what the Absolute is (with a bit of work), and Maimonides because he thinks it is simply impossible for us to ever know what is so radically other than us.¹⁸ I think that these fundamental distinctions would also hold in some significant ways between Islamic, Christian and Kabbalistic conceptions of the Absolute. The common thread seems to be that even when

¹⁸ At least, he is generally understood to think this way.

traditions agree that we can have some type of mystical *gnosis* of the Absolute, we still cannot say what the Absolute is or what knowledge of it specifically involves. A quirk of the necessary inadequacy of language this might be, but the consequence is that we cannot actually know whether mystics of all religious bents are referring to the same thing.

What is it, then, that mystics claim to experience? Is every mystic – even when of divergent traditions – experiencing the same thing? It might be (as the religious pluralists claim) that mystics talk in the same way about the Absolute because they are experiencing the same existing thing in similar ways. Might it be the case, though, that there is another reason for their reporting of similar experiences of the same thing? William James hints at this in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, suggesting that mystical experiences appear to have some pathological context, but quickly dismisses this citing lack of reliable evidence (1917: 387, note 230). James spends some time talking around physical causes whilst simultaneously failing to acknowledge them. He argues that substance use (specifically alcohol and nitrous oxide, but we can easily apply his reasoning to psychoactive substances and so on) can ‘stimulate the mystical faculties of human nature’ allowing ‘genuine metaphysical revelation’ (1917: 387). It might turn out to be the case that such substances do indeed unlock some hidden level of mystical consciousness, but it might equally be the case that such substances simply increase our propensity to reify concepts that do not capture anything real. Indeed, this is the very reason why the Buddhist monastic code cautions against ingesting any mind-altering substances. That is not to say that a person cannot come by such ecstasy without the help of mind-altering substances: such realisations might be spontaneous and entirely ‘natural’. James notes, though, that they generally assume a

certain character and that this character can be actively cultivated: the most concerted efforts to do this have been made by the Indian meditative traditions (1917: 400).

Yet I think it the case that there remains too much divergence between mystics of different religious loyalties for it to be the case that each of them is reporting an experience of the same Absolute. I have already outlined some distinctive differences between the Advaitin mysticism of Śaṅkara and the type of mysticism alluded to by Maimonides, for example. For his part, James (1917: 424-425) eventually concedes that

[t]he classic religious mysticism, it now must be confessed, is only a “privileged case.” It is an extract, kept true to type by the selection of the fittest specimens and their preservation in “schools.” It is carved out from a much larger mass; and if we take the larger mass as seriously as religious mysticism has historically taken itself, we find that the supposed unanimity largely disappears.

James goes on to illustrate some of these stark differences, noting that for some traditions, the Absolute is dualistic, for others it is a monism; for some it is pantheistic, for others monotheistic and for still others, beyond any such categorisation (1917: 425). As we have seen, the cases of mystical experience held up by each tradition are, according to James, the ones that best fit their worldview. Should an Advaitin mystic have some experience that contradicts key Advaitin doctrines (by, for example, gaining gnosis of a dualism and not a monism), it is a sure bet that it would not be recorded and recounted by subsequent Advaitins as proof of the efficacy of their method. Furthermore, there are such ‘mystical states’ which *are* pathological – they are, as James puts it, ‘characteristic symptoms of enfeebled or deluded states of mind’ (1917: 426). Such a ‘mysticism’ is destructive, causing real issues both for the person experiencing whatever delusion plagues them and for the people that must deal with the effects of the behaviour that

such delusions might facilitate. It thus appears that ‘mysticism’ has two sides: a positive and a negative. James, it seems to me, regards the former as mysticism proper, and the latter as not really mysticism at all. It is not immediately clear to me why this distinction ought to be maintained with any fervour: if one is possible, then so, presumably, is the other. If one is the sign of an ‘enfeebled mind’, then why not the other? James agrees that we non-mystics are not obliged to ‘acknowledge in mystical states a superior authority conferred on them by their intrinsic nature’ (1917: 427).¹⁹ Instead, he writes that we ought to consider such states to be ‘inroads from the subconscious life, of the cerebral activity correlative to which we as yet know nothing’ (1917: 427). In other words, such states are indicative of *something* in the ‘subconscious’, but of precisely what, we do not know.²⁰

We see, then, that the concept of the Absolute can be shaped according to whichever religious or mystical tradition espouses it. In short, it seems to be a concept deployed by thinkers

¹⁹ James’ use of ‘intrinsic nature’ is interesting. As we will soon see, for Buddhists such as Nāgārjuna, ‘intrinsic nature’ denotes a very specific sort of existence, viz. that which is ultimately real. Given that James clearly believes that mystical experiences transfer to the experiencer a *noetic* quality, I suspect that he also believes that such a knowledge is indeed ‘ultimately true’. On *noesis*, he has the following to say (1917: 380-381):

Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time.

It is important to note that this ‘authority’ carried by the *noetic* experience holds only for the experiencer and not for anybody outside of that experience.

²⁰ This has since been discussed at some length in philosophical, psychological and biological literature. Newberg & D’Aquili provide a useful account of how brain processes and manipulation of them through ritual and so on might give rise to a ‘mystical’ state of consciousness (2000: 260). Miller (2009) offers a thoughtful position relating to Newberg & D’Aquili’s stance regarding the discussion of transcendental reality (namely that they are not entitled to discuss it at all).

of certain biases and loyalties that has then been reified according to those very biases and loyalties. Miller conceives of a situation whereby the 'Absolute' is actually numerically identical to 'baseline reality' (viz. reality as experienced *normally*, outside of mystical or enlightened experience). This is a position to which I am immediately drawn precisely because I think that it might have some degree of correlation with the position of Nāgārjuna to be discussed in later sections. Miller's thesis is that baseline reality and the Absolute are the same thing but experienced in a different manner (2009: 48). He expands thus:

For example, there may be one sense in which the world is fundamentally united (as appears to be the case in experiences of AUB [Absolute Unitary Being]), and another sense in which the objects of the world can be differentiated. To state just one example of the way in which this could be so: perhaps the world is united in the sense that it is a single physical system (with conservation of energy and so on), but that it is not united in the sense that there are local variations in the kinds or amounts of energy in different parts of the system. These parts, though, might not be fundamentally metaphysically distinct, if they are all causally interconnected with one another. If a person had this kind of belief, then the experience of AUB could conform to the criterion of intersubjective coherence. If a person believed that either the experience of AUB or the experience of baseline reality is an illusion, however, then the experience of AUB would fail the criterion of intersubjective coherence.

(2009: 48)

There are some parallels to be drawn with Buddhist thought here. Miller suggests that the parts of a whole need not be fundamentally distinct if they are all causally interconnected: this is the principal tenet of the Buddhist conception of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). According to this doctrine, there are no fundamental, metaphysically distinct 'simples'; rather, there is simply an infinite web of interconnections between all psycho-

physical phenomena.²¹ A potential issue comes when we think about Miller's final criterion in relation to Buddhism broadly construed. If Buddhists think that 'the experience of baseline reality is an illusion', then they cannot be said to think of baseline reality and the Absolute (AUB) as the same thing experienced in a different way (viz. upon an epistemological shift). There are indeed Buddhists that believe this to be the case, and so Miller's 'intersubjective experience' is not an explanation open to those particular Buddhists. The majority of this work will, though, be assessing such things through a Madhyamaka lens, and it is clear to me that Nāgārjuna's insistence on denying all difference between *saṃsāra* (in Miller's terms, baseline reality) and *nirvāṇa* (in Miller's terms, Absolute Unitary Being) – coupled with his insistence that we should jettison notions of 'ultimacy' (metaphysical primacy) – means that his view might well fit Miller's criteria.²² Of course, Nāgārjuna would not denounce Buddhist *sūtras* that speak of the 'delusion' of sentient beings, and so there would need to be some account of this apparent incongruence. This need not be a major issue, for I think that we can interpret the Buddhist focus on 'delusion' in a specific way, viz. one in which to be 'deluded' is to hold only a partial view of reality. In

²¹ The details of dependent origination are further discussed in the next section.

²² MMK 25.19-20 (my translation):

*na saṃsārasya nirvāṇāt kiṃ cid asti viśeṣaṇam /
na nirvāṇasya saṃsārāt kiṃ cid asti viśeṣaṇam //19//
nirvāṇasya ca yā koṭiḥ koṭiḥ saṃsāraṇasya ca /
na tayo antaraṃ kiṃ cit susūkṣmam api vidyante //20//*

There exists no difference whatsoever between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* /
There exists no difference whatsoever between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* //19//
The limit of *nirvāṇa* [is the] limit of *saṃsāra* /
There is not even the subtlest difference between them //20//

Miller's terms, I think that this could work in two ways: first, one delusion would be to hold that 'baseline reality' is all there is to the world. Second, the other delusion would be to hold that AUB is all there is to the world (and thus impart the metaphysical priority that Miller warns against (2009: 42)). Those without delusion would simply see the totality of reality.

There is also a potential parallel with Advaita Vedānta: Bhattacharya – following the lead of Śaṅkara – asserts that Advaitins too see the change as epistemic rather than metaphysical. For example, Bhattacharya writes that one who knows *Brahman* 'looks upon the world with new eyes' (2015: 13); '[w]e consider as entirely authentic the Mahāyānic doctrine according to which there is, in the transcendent sense, no distinction between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*' (2015: 137); 'the difference between them is *our way of looking at them*; it is epistemic not metaphysical' (2015: 137). Such a position would, on the face of things, seem to tally with what Miller calls the 'intersubjective experience'. Miller notices the immediate problem with this position, however, writing that some Hindu mystics do not, in fact, accept that both the baseline reality and AUB are real. Instead, they hold that the AUB is real whereas the baseline reality is not: '[o]ne example of this view is the claim of Hindu mystics that the world of sense experience is an illusion (*māyā*) and that only the transcendent reality Brahman is real' (Miller, 2009: 48). We might think that such a position is incompatible with the above comments from Bhattacharya, but this is not quite the case. Bhattacharya is right that liberation for the Advaitin consists in an epistemological change – in seeing the world differently – but this does not change the fact that all Advaitins think *Brahman* to be metaphysically prior to this world of *māyā*. It is in fact fundamental to the Advaitin system that this is the case. Bhattacharya endorses Murti's view that the 'empirical' (baseline reality) is the 'veiled form or false appearance of the Absolute' (Bhattacharya, 2015:

137-138; Murti, 2016: 232). Further, Bhattacharya presumably endorses Murti's contention that if both the empirical and the Absolute were real, then the Absolute 'lacking determinations and without any recognisable content, would even be less real than the empirical' (Bhattacharya, 2015: 138; Murti, 2016: 232-233). This is unambiguous and clearly assigns metaphysical priority to the AUB (*Brahman*). As we will see, I do not believe that Nāgārjuna makes this same sort of jump.

All this considered, it seems that there is no consensus – indeed there can be no consensus – on what constitutes the Absolute; if all religions are ultimately talking about the same thing, we might expect a stronger consensus than 'there is a unifying principle, we can know it'. This maxim is really quite vague. Madhyamaka Buddhism – as we have briefly seen – has a still different approach to the Absolute. We find within Buddhism's rich tapestry both affirmations of an Absolute (sometimes very close to that of the Advaitins) and outright rejections of it. It is with the latter that I am concerned, as I intend to demonstrate that contrary to Bhattacharya's thesis, Buddhists of the ilk of Nāgārjuna and his Mādhyamika followers ought not to support any conception of a permanent Absolute. This includes – as I shall later demonstrate – the conception of the Absolute as some *fundamentum absolutum inconcussum veritatis*, as the unshakeable ground of truth.

§2: The Question of *Ātman* in Early Buddhism

Buddhism in its richly developed modern form has a famously deep-seated aversion to *ātmavāda* (self-theory or doctrine of self), and so by extension, an aversion to endorsements of an Absolute. This is for good reason: Buddhists – overall – think that any sort of belief in permanence serves only to prolong and propagate dissatisfaction (*duḥkha*), namely via a belief in an enduring immutable ‘self’ (*ātman*). The reasoning behind this is relatively straightforward: Buddhism is at its heart a doctrine and praxis of change; change from deluded and unawakened to awakened and liberated. The idea of an immutable essence is then anathema to this doctrine: how might a person that is essentially (and thus permanently) unawakened ever have a chance at dissatisfaction’s cessation? The Buddhist line is simply that an immutable essence precludes – by definition – any hope of liberation. It is the clinging to the effects entailed by a belief in a permanent self that constitute the most insidious forms of dissatisfaction. This in turn makes the very idea of *ātman* the most insidious *cause* of dissatisfaction. The general idea is that self-interest and attachment to both ‘I’ and things that we surmise as *belonging to* the ‘I’ drive anxiety and so dissatisfaction.

Strong notions of ‘I’ mean that we become attached to transient things, but more significantly, it means that we have strong attachment to ourselves. A strong ‘I’ notion means that we suffer anxieties relating to ourselves; we are concerned about the possibility of being sick, of ageing, and of the possibility (and eventual certainty) of death. More trivially, we have anxieties about those things that we construe as ‘ours’, and even nice, initially pleasurable things end up as dissatisfying. A pleasurable experience (hearing one’s favourite record, for example)

gives us a sense of satisfaction (*sukha*) for a characteristically short period of time (are any of us in a permanent state of satisfaction after enjoying only once something that pleases us?). Therefore, when I take great pleasure in hearing my favourite record, I am cultivating attachment and grasping on multiple levels. I initially enjoy the temporary feeling that hearing the record elicits within me. I can then be said to grasp at three things in regards to pleasure: the record itself (as deliverer of pleasure), the feeling of pleasure, and the ability to feel the pleasure. More specifically, I suppose we become attached to the ability to sate a desire as and when it arises, thus reinforcing the idea of self – of *me* both doing the action required and feeling the benefit of its result.²³ I then feel the urge to replicate this feeling of satisfaction/contentedness and so spend time and effort on reproducing the pleasurable effect by whichever means we came by it (in this case, hearing our favourite record). The result is a temporary sense of satisfaction, but a stronger attachment to the 'I' that we think is being satisfied. It is this latter point against which the Buddhist project attempts to work.

Of course, the counterpart to cultivation of attachment to pleasure is varying degrees of dissatisfaction. On the Buddhist worldview, such dissatisfaction arises in virtue of our attachment to the specific phenomenon (the record) and the circumstances that might prevent us from actualising the feeling of satisfaction to which we are attached (playing the record). This only

²³ It seems as though any attachment to a feeling must contain some symmetrical attachment (perhaps 'grasping' might be a more suitable term here) to the 'I' that experiences the feeling. In other words, the feeling serves to reinforce what Buddhists ultimately take to be a mistaken belief in this immutable 'I'. If we were told that we were to be in a position whereby we could not physically *feel* this (or, more starkly, *any*) pleasure, it would cause some anxiety.

ceases – and then only temporarily – when we find ourselves in a situation whereby we can once again play our favourite record. We might find ourselves in the unfortunate situation whereby we can no longer feel a given (or indeed any) pleasure whatsoever – this would, I expect, cause great anxiety: nobody wants to be in a position whereby they never again feel pleasure (or perhaps more accurately, where they cannot sate a desire and feel the (temporary) result).²⁴ We find ourselves, then, trapped in an endless circle of temporary, fleeting desire-satiation, all of which is ultimately doomed to inadequacy, and all of which serves to simply reinforce the very ‘I’ notions that fuel the cycle to begin with.

²⁴ Interestingly (and undoubtedly factoring into Bhattacharya’s thought), both Advaita and Buddhism talk of liberation in some very similar ways. Advaita talks of the ‘bliss’ (*ānanda*) of Brahman, so called because all desire is removed and so there is wanting for nothing. Buddhist sources generally stop short of using words analogous to *ānanda* (though not always!) and instead speak of the ‘extinction’ of desire. This amounts, I think, to broadly the same thing. The difference is then a matter of what this extinction of desire consists in, if anything at all. The Buddhists would usually claim that there is a sort of unconditioned awareness but that this does not imply an immersion into a further immutable substantial whole. The Advaitins would claim that this unconditioned awareness is itself a substantial Reality (*Brahman*), and our awareness of it is a result of us finally knowing our true nature (i.e. we are no more than the *ātman-Brahman*).

To this end, the *Samyutta Nikāya* (II Book IX.1.2; PTS p359) has the following to say (my translation):

*Katamañca bhikkhave asaṅkhatam / Yo bhikkhave rāgakkhaya dosakkhaya
mohakkhaya idaṃ vuccati bhikkhave asaṅkhatam //*

O bhikkhus, what is the unconditioned [Absolute] (*asaṅkhatam*)? It is, O bhikkhus, the extinction of desire [lust; greed] (*rāgakkhaya*) the extinction of hatred (*dosakkhaya*), the extinction of confusion [illusion] (*mohakkhaya*). This, O bhikkhus, is called the unconditioned.

Here we have a clear account of the liberated experience: the removal (extinction) of desire, hatred, and illusion. This experience must be blissful precisely because all desires are not just temporarily sated, but fully dissolved, much like the accounts of *ānanda* for the Advaitin. There is, however, an important privation in the account from the *Samyutta Nikāya* – there is no mention of this being the substantial, eternal reality that *Brahman* is purported to be.

This being the case, the Buddhists argue, we ought not to ascribe any permanent nature to either the circumstances, the feelings or the objects involved; all of which come about as a result of *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination). This is a complex inter-dependent web of connections between every experienced phenomenon, all of which combine in innumerable ways in order to affect everything else. Insofar as Buddhism has an ontological principle, it is this; there are no phenomena which are unconditioned by the process of dependent origination, and so this causal principle dictates that everything in the experienced world is intimately and inextricably related to everything else.²⁵ There is, on the face of things, no first cause and no permanent substratum.²⁶

Buddhists are usually understood to deny any underlying unchanging identity to the experiencer (me; you), the circumstances that present themselves in the world, or to the feelings that present themselves to us. In fact, it is usually taken to be the case that Buddhists deny underlying, unchanging identity in the world *in toto*.²⁷ So, for many, the defining characteristic

²⁵ Some Buddhist schools have a nuanced take on this, which I shall here sketch briefly. It is true that a number of Buddhist schools hold that the state of *nirvāṇa* is unconditioned by dependent origination. Indeed, it is *the only* state that is untouched by dependent origination. On this understanding, we might be tempted to accept such a *nirvāṇa* as an Absolute. Nāgārjuna and his followers in the Madhyamaka school eschew this idea, explicitly arguing that there is (and can be) no difference at all between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* (MMK 25.19). The reasons for this conclusion will be covered in detail later.

²⁶ It must be noted that if some Buddhist schools and interpreters do indeed follow the analysis that we will shortly see put forth by Bhattacharya, then they might reasonably be said to endorse some sort of first cause (namely the *ātman-Brahman*).

²⁷ There is a nuance here, namely that for some Buddhists, the basic constituents which combine via *pratītyasamutpāda* to manifest as all psycho-physical phenomena *do indeed* have permanent, unchanging identities (*svabhāva*). Such Buddhists still hold that the world as experienced lack such a grounding because all experience is a conglomeration of *dharmas* combining in different ways via dependent origination. According to such a position, the role of dependent origination is preserved insofar as all experienced phenomena are indeed

of Buddhism – in contradistinction to other Indian religions such as Jainism and the various schools of Hinduism – is precisely that it advances the position that there is no enduring substantial self (*anātman*) and largely bases its soteriological methodology on the realisation of this truth. Speaking of truth, it would be appropriate to interject briefly with a note on ‘truth’ in Buddhism and in Advaita. In both Buddhist and Advaitin literature, we see reference to *saṃvṛtisatya* (conventional truth/reality) and *paramārthasatya* (ultimate truth/reality) in relation to both their respective teachings and end goals. It looks as though the two truths were devised as a means by which to navigate seemingly contradictory or inconsistent scripture. Such a process would allow a commentator or adherent to make sense of things that initially look to be in conflict, for example the Buddha’s referring to the ‘self as refuge’²⁸ whilst also appearing to

conditioned by these intrinsically existent *dharmas*. The Madhyamaka school of Nāgārjuna holds, however, that *anātman* should apply from the top down, and so even *dharmas* cannot hold an immutable identity of any sort. For the Mādhyamika, then, for dependent origination to hold at all, it must hold in all circumstances, and this necessarily means that *dharmas* could not possess *svabhāva*.

²⁸ Pérez-Remón (1980: 20) translates the following section of the *Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta*:

Tasmātiḥānanda, attadīpā viharatha attasaraṇā anaññasaraṇā, dhammadīpā dhammasaraṇā anaññasaraṇā

Therefore, Ānanda, stay as those who have the self as island, as those who have the self as refuge, as those who have no other refuge; as those who have dhamma as island, as those who have dhamma as refuge, as those who have no other refuge.

deny the self.^{29,30} Conventional truths are, according to Siderits and Katsura truths for which ‘acceptance reliably leads to successful practice. Our commonsense convictions concerning

²⁹ Thanissaro Bhikkhu (1997) translates the following passage from the *Samanupassanā Sutta*:

Sāvatthinidānaṃ. “Ye hi keci, bhikkhave, samaṇā vā brāhmaṇā vā anekavihiṭṭaṃ attānaṃ samanupassamānā samanupassanti, sabbete pañcupādānakkhandhe samanupassanti, etesaṃ vā aññataraṃ. Katame pañca? Idha, bhikkhave, assutavā puthujjano ariyānaṃ adassāvī ariyadhammassa akovido ariyadhamme avinīto, sappurisānaṃ adassāvī sappurisadhammassa akovido sappurisa-dhamme avinīto rūpaṃ attato samanupassati, rūpavantaṃ vā attānaṃ; attani vā rūpaṃ, rūpasmiṃ vā attānaṃ. Vedanaṃ ... saññānaṃ ... saṅkhāre ... viññāṇaṃ attato samanupassati, viññāṇavantaṃ vā attānaṃ; attani vā viññāṇaṃ, viññāṇasmiṃ vā attānaṃ.

At Savatthi. There the Blessed One said, "Monks, whatever contemplatives or brahmans who assume in various ways when assuming a self, all assume the five clinging-aggregates, or a certain one of them. Which five? There is the case where an uninstructed, run-of-the-mill person — who has no regard for noble ones, is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma; who has no regard for men of integrity, is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma — assumes form (the body) to be the self, or the self as possessing form, or form as in the self, or the self as in form.

³⁰ It can be argued that these two positions are not actually incompatible with each other when understood a certain way. Bhattacharya references these sorts of canonical examples (see 2015: 31, 38 for examples of this) to illustrate that the Buddha was at all times endorsing a transcendental self, viz. the *ātman-Brahman*. This reading, though, depends on a very specific reading of ‘*ātman*’ — one that always translates it as a substantial, ultimate self. However, in some cases, we need not make this jump, and in exercising this self-control, we change the force of the sentence quite significantly. It should always be borne in mind that some uses of *ātman* in Sanskrit literature and *attā* in the Pāli literature — be they Buddhist sources or otherwise — are simply as a reflexive pronoun. In the example given in note 98, this realisation changes things in an important way. Instead of encouraging the practitioner to ‘take refuge in the Self’, where ‘Self’ has an initial capital letter and means the sort of subtle essence present inside of us that Bhattacharya endorses, we have ‘take oneself as refuge’ in a much weaker sense, meaning something more along the lines of ‘do not look to anybody else for your liberation’.

This line from the *Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta* then no longer endorses the idea that we ought to delve inside our essential *ātman* to realise the ultimate truth and become one with *Brahman*. It very simply means that nobody else is responsible for our liberation, and we should take refuge in ourselves and take personal responsibility for living the *dhamma*. This is a huge change in meaning. In the case given above (and other cases like it), it looks as though Bhattacharya and his fellow Advaitins have, from a Buddhist perspective, fallen foul of a reification: taking a simple reflexive pronoun to represent an enduring, ultimately existent entity!

This interpretation can be applied with equal force, I think, when Bhattacharya cites *Dhammapada* 160 (2015: 31): ‘*attā hi attanō nāthō kō hi nāthō parō siyā / attanā hi sudantēna nāthaṃ labhati dullabhaṃ*’. We can interpret this as something like ‘one is indeed one’s own refuge. How can another be a refuge to you [one]? With oneself properly controlled, one attains a refuge that is difficult to attain’. Does this read as though we ought to be

ourselves and the world are for the most part conventionally true, since they reflect conventions that have been found to be useful in everyday practice' (2013: 4). We can add to this definition all linguistic designations naming objects and events. Names represent entities that are conventionally real, which is to say objects that do not possess an intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) and so are not basic, substantial and immutable. We will see that for Nāgārjuna, this characterisation will come to account for all entities. For the Advaitins, it accounts for entities mistakenly assumed to be intrinsically real when one has not realised the unity of the world in *Brahman*. In comparison, '[t]o say of a statement that it is ultimately true is to say that it corresponds to the nature of reality and neither asserts nor presupposes the existence of any mere conceptual fiction' (2013: 4).³¹ This is true for both Buddhists and Advaitins. For somebody like Śaṅkara, the *Brahman* is the only ultimate truth and ultimate reality. It is the only reality that exists, and everything is a manifestation of it. For many Buddhists, it is an ultimate truth that there is no substantial self: this conforms to how things ultimately are from an enlightened Olympian

meditating on the permanence of our essential *ātman*, or as though we ought to take responsibility for our own liberation? I am inclined to read this in the same way as the line from the *Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta*: reference to *atta* (*ātman*) is as a simple reflexive pronoun, used in a conventional manner. That is to say that there are no essential or ultimate connotations to its use. In both cases, then, we need not appeal to some essential feature or principle called *ātman*, we simply have two distinct examples of the Buddha's imploring practitioners to take responsibility for their own spiritual journey instead of investing heavily in other people (and, ultimately, in him!).

³¹ A 'conceptual fiction' is something that is 'thought to exist only because of facts about us as concept-users and the concepts that we happen to employ' (2013: 4). In other words, a conceptual fiction is something that we impose onto the world, not something that exists independently of us as concept-users. The stock example is that of a chariot: a chariot is nothing over and above the collection of part assembled in a specific way ('chariot-wise', if you will). The chariot does not exist as an entity over and above or outside of this collection of so-arranged parts, but it is a convenient shorthand for us to refer to 'the chariot' (or 'the car' or 'the house', for example).

perspective.³² What then can we say about the Buddhist ultimate truth that there is no permanent *ātman*?

Kamaleswar Bhattacharya (1928-2014)³³ argued in his *Ātman-Brahman in Ancient Buddhism* that Buddhism's famed ultimate truth has, in fact, been routinely mischaracterised over the course of a rich Buddhist history. For Bhattacharya, the *ātman* denied by Buddhism is that mistakenly associated with the *jīva*³⁴ and not the *ātman-Brahman* of Advaita. Bhattacharya contends that the Buddha was concerned with continuing the *Upaniṣadic* tradition and leading his followers to knowledge of the transcendent *ātman-Brahman*: a theory that stands at stark odds with the modern understanding of Buddhism as a denial of a permanent self. To this end, Bhattacharya's principal argument is that '[t]he Buddha certainly denied the *ātman*', but with the caveat that the *ātman* denied 'is not the Upaniṣadic *ātman*' (2015: 207). What Bhattacharya means here is as yet obscured by his apparent unwillingness to translate *ātman*. He elsewhere writes that '[b]efore stating that Buddhism has denied the *ātman*, modern authors should, therefore, have been precise as to which *ātman* is meant' (2015: 34). This strikes me as a good idea, and so I will briefly outline what *ātman* could mean.

³² There will be much more to say on this as we continue, and in much more detail, but for now, this rudimentary understanding of conventional and ultimate should suffice for navigation of this work until such a point that more detail is required.

³³ Among Bhattacharya's many publications are *Brahmanic religions in ancient Cambodia, from epigraphy and iconography*; *The Dialectical Method of Nāgārjuna (Vigrahavyāvartani)*; *Some thoughts on Early Buddhism with special reference to its Relation to the Upaniṣads*.

³⁴ *Jīva* is here taken to mean 'individual self' in the Advaitin sense rather than 'immortal individual essence' in a Jaina sense: the Jaina understanding would have *jīva* equivalent with the *ātman-Brahman* without any monistic import, whereas it is clear in Advaitin literature that this is not what is meant.

Lipner characterises the *ātman* as the ‘innermost reality [identity] of the individual, the subtle essence’ (2010: 53), and the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (VIII.7.1) describes a nature (*ātman*) that ‘is free from sin, free from old age, free from death, free from grief, free from hunger, free from thirst, whose desires come true and whose thoughts come true’. Bhattacharya writes that ‘it is not outside of ourselves that we grasp the Real’ (2015: 10), but what does this actually mean? Bhattacharya distinguishes between two senses of *ātman* – one which is real, and one which is mistakenly taken by the unenlightened to be real, but which actually is not. The two senses of *ātman* to which Bhattacharya is referring are the ultimately real *paramātman* of the *ātman-Brahman*, and the reified *vijñāna-ātman* (commonly translated as individual consciousness; analogous to the *jīva*). Bhattacharya thinks that Buddhist doctrine of *anātman* explicitly negates the latter in order to promote knowledge of the former. This distinction will prove to be the bedrock for his thesis that Buddhism does not deny the spiritual *ātman-Brahman*, and instead only negates a sort of personal *ātman* that is analogous with the human ego. He writes that ‘[t]he *ātman* is not the individual ego, but rather “the super-reality of the *jīva*, the individual ego”’ (2015: 5); ‘neither the Upaniṣads nor Buddhism deny the empirical reality of the individual. They only deny its ontological substantiality’ (2015: 17)³⁵; ‘when they [the Upaniṣads] state that the *ātman-brahman* is the sole Reality, [they] are in fact denying that psycho-social being which men, too often, consider as the *ātman*’ (2015: 34). It is clear that Bhattacharya thinks that people

³⁵ I suppose that ‘empirical reality of the individual’ might mean a sense of self or the existence of this thing ‘an individual human’ walking, talking and interacting with the world. Here, Bhattacharya’s point is that whilst both the *Upaniṣads* and Buddhism acknowledge this sort of ‘individual’ conventionally, they do not acknowledge its ultimate existence. A ‘conventional’ acknowledgement is simply to allow use of the term ‘individual’ as a type of useful fiction with some instrumental value insofar as we have to navigate the ‘empirical’ (read: conventional, not ultimately real) world. A conventional truth, entity etc. cannot ever have ‘ultimate’ status.

simply misapply the label *ātman* to that which it is not. In other words, the ‘psycho-social being’ referred to is actually *anātman* in the simplest sense – it is not the *ātman*. What, then, is the *ātman* to which Bhattacharya is referring? How might we access it? In words not dissimilar from those religious thinkers covered in §1, Bhattacharya (2015: 6) writes that

The *ātman* is the ‘inner ruler’ (*antaryāmin*) which resides in the Universe but is distinct from and Unknown to the Universe. All our activities derive from it; there is no other seer than it, no other hearer, no other thinker and no other knower. Even so, it remains invisible itself, inaudible, unthinkable, unknowable. The *ātman* is the “inner light” (*antarjyotis*) of man.

The corporeal (*saśarīra*) *ātman* is mortal; it experiences pleasure and pain. But the incorporeal (*aśarīra*) *ātman*, the authentic *ātman*, is immortal; it is exempt from all pleasure and from all suffering.

We can see here that Bhattacharya thinks that the embodied (*saśarīra*) *ātman*, that *ātman* which we directly experience, that we take as the ‘I’, is a mortal entity. It is the super-reality behind this individual *ātman*, the *ātman-Brahman*, which is the true Reality. It certainly sounds as though Bhattacharya is operating on a similar plane to those of the mystics discussed in the previous section. He talks of an ultimate principle *ātman* (*Brahman*) in very similar terms to Maimonides’ discussion of God: unknowable, unthinkable, somehow beyond this world. There is a caveat, however, that separates Bhattacharya from thinkers such as Maimonides – this state of ignorance need not be the case. We can *come to know* the *ātman-Brahman*, just not by conventional means.

In the *Ātmabodha*, attributed to Śaṅkara, we read

*drśyate śrūyate yadya brahmaṇonyanna tadbhavet /
tattvajñānācca tadbrahma saccidānandamadvayam //64//*

Whatever is seen, [whatever] is heard, is not other than Brahman.
[Through] clear knowledge of reality, [one sees] the Brahman;
Being, pure thought, bliss, unity.³⁶

Knowing the *ātman-Brahman*, then, is a matter of ‘clear knowledge of reality’. For Śaṅkara, it seems we *can* know ‘God’ (the Absolute, the *Brahman*), but we have to gain this knowledge in a very specific way, alien to our usual means of knowledge. Swami Nikhilānanda asserts in the commentary to the above *śloka* that it is via the attainment of ‘Right Knowledge’ that one knows the *Brahman*, and even the state of unknowing is necessarily *Brahman*; ‘[f]rom the standpoint of Brahman even ignorance and its products, names and forms, are nothing but Brahman’ (1962: 227-228). Nikhilānanda also reiterates the stock Advaitin view that ‘what appears as the manifold universe to the ignorant is realised by the illumined to be indivisible and non-dual Brahman’ (1962: 226). The implications are, I think, clear. Indeed, Bhattacharya (2015: 5) asks ‘[w]hat is the *Upaniṣadic ātman*?’ He writes that it is

neither the body nor the totality of the psycho-physical elements which make up the empirical individual. The ‘body’ is no more than a ‘support’ (*adhiṣṭhāna*) of the incorporeal (*aśarīra*) *ātman* – of the *ātman* ‘without *ātman*’ (*anātmīya*, *nirātman*, *nirātmaka*). “Just as the best is yoked to the cart, so the *prāṇa* (that is, the *ātman*) is yoked to this body.” The *ātman* is the ‘inner ruler’ (*antaryāmin*) which resides in the Universe but is distinct from and unknown to the Universe. All our activities derive from it; there is no other seer than it, no other hearer, no other thinker and no other knower. Even so, it remains invisible itself, inaudible, unthinkable, unknowable.

(Bhattacharya, 2015: 5-6)

³⁶ Unless otherwise indicated, translations from Pāli and Sanskrit sources are my own.

He continues that the *ātman* actually *is Brahman*: '[o]ur essence is the *ātman* which is beyond all these elements [psycho-physical components]' (2015: 7), and it is 'beyond the relation implied by all thought' (2015: 8). It is this Absolute which 'opens to us on completion of our evolution, comprises life, will and consciousness, although it goes beyond them' (2015: 10). Thus the *ātman-Brahman* is the cause of and substratum of everything despite being radically other than all that it causes and supports.

All of this is orthodox Advaitin doctrine. For Śaṅkara, the world as it seems to us is not to be taken at face value: true reality inheres only in the 'infinite, eternal, unchanging, pure bliss consciousness that is Brahman, or Paramātman' (Betty, 2010: 216).³⁷ Śaṅkara is here explicitly equating the *ātman* with the Brahman: the two share an intimate connection that cannot be overstated; *Brahman* is the entirety of the cosmos, and this has direct influence over how we are to understand *ātman* as an essential principle. To this end, *Katha Upaniṣad* 6:2-4 says:

yadidaṃ kiṃca jagatsarvaṃ prāṇa ejati niḥsṛtam /
mahadbhayaṃ vajramudyataṃ ya etadviduramṛtāste bhavanti
 //2//

bhayādasyāgnistapati bhayāttapati sūryaḥ /
bhayādiraśca vāyuśca mṛtyurdhāvati pañcamah //3//
iha cedaśakadbodhuṃ prākśarīrasya visraṣaḥ /
tataḥ sargeṣu lokeṣu śarīratvāya kalpate //4//

All the universe emanates from this breath [*prāṇa*; breath of life, *Brahman*] and moves [in *Brahman*].
 [That *Brahman*] causes great fear, like a poised thunderbolt. Those
 that know this [*Brahman*] become immortal //2//

³⁷ *Paramātman* is perhaps best rendered as 'supreme reality'. The idea for Śaṅkara is that the Brahman is the 'supreme reality', and realising it – becoming it – is the highest possible attainment.

From fear of Him, fire burns; from fear [of Him], the sun gives heat.

From fear [of him], Indra [lord of the gods] and Vāya [god of the winds], and Death, the fifth, speed [on their way]. //3//

If, here and now, one is able to know [the *Brahman*] before the disintegration of the body,

Then one is fit for embodiment in the created world. //4//³⁸

Here, the *Brahman* is shown to be the universal essential principle from which all things emanate, including individual selves. We can also clearly see that the principal spiritual project for humans is to realise or know *Brahman*.

³⁸ Readers might notice that there is an incongruity in the Sanskrit text of 6.4. My translation above illustrates that the Sanskrit reads ambiguously, for it seems to be suggesting that if a person does gain knowledge of the Brahman, they will nevertheless be reborn (embodied; *śarīratva*) into the created worlds (*sargeṣu lokeṣu*). This, though, seems to fly in the face of established Advaitin soteriological doctrine, viz. that knowledge of the Brahman is the key to liberation. Indeed, it seems to be contradicted only two verses earlier, where it is stated that '[t]hose that know this [Brahman] become immortal'.

How, then, to solve this quandary? One possible route would be to amend *sargeṣu* to *svargeṣu*. In so doing, the locative plurals '*svargeṣu lokeṣu*' would then translate as 'in the heavenly realms' rather than the previous 'in the created world/realms'. This is a position that has been suggested by numerous scholars across the years, not least by Robert Ernest Hume in translation of the *Upaniṣads*. Here, Hume provides a brief but useful discussion of the issue at hand when he writes that

[t]he reading *svargeṣu* instead of *sargeṣu* would yield the more suitable meaning 'in the heavenly worlds.' At best, the stanza contradicts the general theory that perception of the Ātman produces release from reincarnation immediately after death. Consequently Śaṅkara supplies an ellipsis which changes the meaning entirely, and Max Muller hesitatingly inserts a 'not' in the first line. The present translation interprets the meaning that the degree of perception of the Ātman in the present world determines one's reincarnate status.

(Hume, 1921: 359)

We might remain confused as to how one might become 'embodied' in the 'heavenly realms' (realms which, I think, we need to understand as Brahman in its totality as understood from a liberated viewpoint) when the thrust of Advaitin philosophy is – as we shall see – focussed on turning inward. Advaitins following Śaṅkara's lead think that we should concern ourselves with knowing the Brahman rather than concerning ourselves with material things in the material world. To this end, Vasu suggests that we should understand 'embodiment in the heavenly realms' as meaning something like residing in a spiritual body which 'is immaterial and consists of the bliss and intelligence' rather than thinking that it means we are 'reborn' in the conventional *saṃsāric* sense (Vasu, 1905: 175).

What does this mean in terms of *ātman* and *Brahman*? Chris Bartley puts it succinctly when he says that '[t]he cosmos is thought of as a single whole that has essence and this is what is called the *Brahman*. Individual selves, microcosm[ic] versions of the cosmos, too have essence and this is what is called *ātman*. If essence is indivisible, the *Brahman* equates to *ātman*' (Bartley, 2011: 10). This reading is further strengthened by the *Upaniṣad*'s assertion that those that fail to reach liberation through knowledge of *Brahman* are doomed to return and 'put on' a body – further driving home the notion that we are not identical with our bodies, but with the essential principle contained inside them.

We might think that this is far removed from the 'traditional' views of Buddhism, and on the face of things, we would be right. One might reasonably assume that Buddhism must at least have been sufficiently different to its Brahminical contemporaries; else, it would not have developed as a separate tradition to the Vedic schools at all. Thomas Wood has previously stated that 'a full reconciliation of the Vedānta and Buddhism was manifestly impossible', and that 'no orthodox Buddhist could have upheld the doctrine of an Absolute which is unchanging, pure consciousness' (1992: 73).

It is surprising, then, that several scholars find textual justification to support the thesis that the Buddha tacitly endorsed the *ātman*. According to Bhattacharya, the Buddha 'simply said, in speaking of the *skandha/khandhas*, ephemeral and painful, which constitute the psycho-physical being of a man: *n' etaṃ mama, n' eso 'ham asmi, na m' eso attā*, "This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my *ātman*"' (Bhattacharya, 2015: 6). In other words, whilst the Buddha did indeed deny that the interaction of the *skandhas* amounted to the *ātman*, by negating what is

not ātman, he tacitly endorsed – in virtue of this negation – a type of ultimate, spiritual *ātman*: the *Brahman*. The upshot of this is that Buddhism is in fact some sort of revised Brahmanism, or more specifically, as Bhattacharya eventually implies, a type of early Advaita Vedānta later inherited by Śaṅkara. This reading is anathema to the developed Buddhist understanding of *anātman* with which we are familiar today, which is usually taken as denying any and all forms of ‘self’, whether the self is understood as the reification of interactions between the *skandhas*, or a more permanent transcendent ‘*Brahman*’ as attested in the *Upaniṣads*. It is again worth mentioning that Bhattacharya here leaves *ātman* untranslated. It is possible that this is because it is an ambiguous word that derives its precise meaning (insofar as one can be determined) from the context in which it is used – it can be tricky to translate accurately. It might also be the case, though, that Bhattacharya leaves *ātman* untranslated because when he uses the word he has a very specific context in mind, namely the blissful, ultimate nature described in the *Upaniṣads*. However, this context need not be shared by the utterances of the Buddha. A possibility that Bhattacharya is loath to consider is that the Buddha is simply stating ‘this is not my nature’ without implying that there actually *is a different, blissful nature*.

For Bhattacharya, then, it is specifically the transcendent *Brahman* of the *Upaniṣads* that the Buddha is indirectly affirming, and achieving *nirvāṇa* thus amounts to realising this *Brahman*. His arguments for this are numerous and include some choice readings of Mahāyāna *sūtras*; a specific use and understanding of *svabhāva* in Madhyamaka thought; presupposing the *ātman* as (although transcendent!) an existent thing, and a very specific interpretation of the negative method. All of these factors and more will be addressed in what follows, but first I will give some preliminary remarks on Bhattacharya’s opening gambit: the thesis that the Buddha, through

denying the *ātman* in one sense, actually endorses a more fundamental sort of *ātman* in another sense.

The starting point of Bhattacharya's argument here is the idea that the negative method necessarily implies a positive existent. In discussing the negative method that is employed by the Buddha, Bhattacharya specifies that for something to be negated – in this instance, things to be identified with the *ātman* – there must be an ultimately real ground underpinning that which is negated. This sort of objection is particularly familiar to the Mādhyamika, and has enjoyed a resurgence in popularity via such philosophers as Giuseppe Ferraro in recent years (Ferraro, 2013). Throughout, I will assess the merits of Bhattacharya's claim in light of his various arguments supporting it, taking a specifically Mādhyamika tack throughout. There are several reasons for this. First, though Bhattacharya is at pains to point out that various interpretations of parts of Pāli Buddhism (and so the canonical *Tripitaka* (Pāli: *Tipiṭaka*)) support his conclusion that the Buddha affirms by negation what he calls the *ātman-Brahman* (effectively making the Buddha an early Advaitin - more on this later). Consequently, he thinks that the established schools of the Abhidharma are mistaken in how they address essence (and thus *ātman*) (2015: 38-39). Second, Bhattacharya thinks that it is the Mahāyāna schools 'which put things right' (2015: 39), and so argues that it is the Mahāyāna that provides the real scope for his interpretation to flourish. I intend to examine this contention and show why I think there is at least one Mahāyāna school – Madhyamaka – which should not, if it is to remain true to its own foundations, take such a view. Third, Bhattacharya endorses Ramanan's position equating *svabhāva* (own-being), *svarūpa* (own-form; own-nature) and *ātman* as 'the essential nature...of the individual as well as of all things' (Bhattacharya, 2015: 144, note 249). It is at this same point

that Bhattacharya claims (via Venkata Ramanan) that Madhyamaka accepts *ātman* as *svabhāva* on the proviso that this *svabhāva* is not a ‘separate, substantial entity inhabiting the body of each individual’ (2015: 144, note 249). There are, *prima facie*, some problems with this stance when examined from a Buddhist perspective, especially in light of the *anātman* doctrine, and especially from the Madhyamaka viewpoint. It appears as though Bhattacharya has reified the notion of *svabhāva* (as a ‘separate substantial entity’ which somehow inhabits a body) only to claim that this reified sort of *svabhāva* is not what is accepted by Mādhyamikas. It is not immediately obvious to me that this is at all what anybody claims – entities either have or lack a *svabhāva*, they do not have or lack *types of svabhāva*, and so the distinction is redundant. In any case, how these notions are dealt with by the relevant Buddhist and Advaitin traditions will have great influence over how we should understand notions of truth; notions of truth that are integral to understanding how both the soteriological methods and goals of each school operate.

For these reasons then, I will emphasise why I think that Madhyamaka Buddhists would not – or at the very least *should* not – endorse an *ātman-Brahman* of the same sort as the *Upaniṣads*. This inevitably means that I will dispute Bhattacharya’s argument that for both Advaitins and Buddhists, the ultimate truth is identical (viz. the ultimate truth is the *ātman-Brahman*). I will also examine how and why the Mahāyāna leaves itself open to such comparisons by paying some attention to the various ideas connected to essence or the Absolute at play in the background to its philosophy (*svarūpa*; *svabhāva*; *dharmakāya* and *tathāgatagarbha*; *śūnyatā*). The sum of these efforts will be, I hope, a refutation of the thesis that the Buddha was a proto-Advaitin who tacitly endorsed the *ātman-Brahman* and further a refutation that the ultimate truth (and thus the ultimate destination) is identical in both Advaita Vedānta and

Buddhism. I will, then, take the Mādhyamika approach to this issue and argue that Nāgārjuna could not have (and would not have) under any circumstances endorsed a notion of an Absolute, ultimate reality. I will do this by extrapolating key Madhyamaka principles and illustrating that accepting an Absolute of any sort is necessarily contrary to the Middle Way as Nāgārjuna designed it, and that *śūnyatā* as devised and elaborated by Nāgārjuna cannot provide the ultimate grounding of existence that commentators such as Bhattacharya suppose it can.

2.1 Bhattacharya's Argument

Let us start, then, at the beginning. Bhattacharya opens by citing a Cambodian inscription that curiously appears to both acknowledge that impersonality (given here as *nairātmya*) is incompatible with supreme-selfhood (*paramātmān*), but nevertheless claim that the Buddha taught insubstantiality as a means to *achieve* realisation of supreme-selfhood (Bhattacharya, 2015: 1).³⁹ The idea presented here is the linchpin that holds together Bhattacharya's entire thesis: using no-self to deny what the *ātman* is *not* necessarily leaves to one side that which the *ātman* really is. The inscription, it is worth bearing in mind, is attributed to the reign of Rājendravarman, and so is thought to be dated somewhere between 944 and 968 CE: a considerable amount of time after the advent of the Mahāyāna, and, importantly, centuries after

³⁹ I think that interpretations such as Bhattacharya's are to a large degree a result of the tendency to translate all instances and variations of *ātman* as 'self'. Being a multi-faceted term, we can sometimes translate *ātman* as 'I' in the sense of a simple reflexive pronoun, as 'self', or as 'essence' or 'nature'. If, for example, we use 'nature' instead of 'self', we have something along the lines of insubstantiality is taught as the supreme nature of phenomena. Another way to put this would be to say that the nature of things is to lack *svabhāva*. The Buddhist might still be uncomfortable with talk of a 'supreme nature', but its occurrence can be accounted for by distinguishing between conventional and ultimate truths and the limitations of, aims of and usefulness of language in relation to this distinction. It might refer only to a concept intended to prove a point but itself empty of any substantial existence.

the dissemination of important Mahāyānist texts such as Nāgārjuna's seminal *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK).⁴⁰ Supporting Bhattacharya's reading is a citation from the *Mahāyāna-Sūtrālaṃkāra* translated by S. Lévi (and slightly modified by Bhattacharya) as

In utterly pure Emptiness, the Buddhas have attained to the summit of the *ātman*, which consists in Impersonality. Since they have found, thus, the pure *ātman*, they have reached the heights of *ātman*.

(Bhattacharya, 2015: 2)

The translation goes on to include a commentary,⁴¹ specifying that the *ātman* of the Buddhas 'consists in the essential Impersonality', which is in turn 'absolute Thus-ness', and is also '*ātman* in the sense of the own-nature of the Buddhas' (2015: 2).⁴²

The *Mahāyāna-Sūtrālaṃkāra* itself is a Yogācāra text attributed to Asaṅga (himself a Yogācārin), and so is a later development of (or deviation from) earlier Mahāyāna thought. As Conze writes, despite the Mādhyamikas and Yogācārins being 'quite distinct in their interests and intentions', the Yogācārins nevertheless 'regarded the Mādhyamika doctrine as a preliminary stage of their own, which however missed the true and esoteric core of the Buddha's teachings'

⁴⁰ There are notorious difficulties with dating ancient texts and their authors. I do not intend to cover these controversies here, but will rather adhere to the generally accepted – if speculative – timeframes generally used by scholars of Buddhism.

⁴¹ Precisely whose commentary this is, we do not know. Bhattacharya states in his notes that 'We do not touch here on the much discussed question of the author or authors of this text and of its commentary'. Other translations, like the recent 2014 Ornament of the Great Vehicle Sutras, claim to make use of Vasubandhu's commentary, but in this case, do so from the Tibetan rather than the Sanskrit. There are disagreements as to the authorship, and it is by no means clear that Vasubandhu did write the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkārabhāṣya*. For the sake of argument, I will assume that he did write it, and that we can interpret it in the same vein as his other texts.

⁴² Following the spirit of this translation, Bhattacharya, in note 249 (via n.7), endorses K. Venkata Ramanan's bold claim that not only do Mādhyamikas accept *ātman* as an 'essential nature', but they also equate it with the *svabhāva* and *svarūpa* 'of the individual as well as of all things' (2015: 114). .

(Conze, 1993: 38-39). Conze also notes that, for their part, the Mādhyamikas regarded the Yogācārin project as ‘a quite incomprehensible perversity’ (1993: 39), presumably owing to the supposedly idealist position occupied by later Yogācārins. This also speaks to the variation of thought between schools loosely united under the ‘Mahāyāna’ banner, and serves as a preliminary warning against prematurely lumping together doctrinally divergent Mahāyāna schools. There are just as many points of disagreement as there are points of agreement! I here tentatively suggest that this could prove to be a reason why Bhattacharya’s contention that it was the Mahāyāna which ‘put things right’ regarding the nature of reality might be too broad a stroke.

Regarding the translation given by Bhattacharya, I note with some interest that *ātman* again remains untranslated. This is most likely because Bhattacharya wants *ātman* to be taken in the Advaitin sense, viz. as an instantiation of the *Brahman*. The *Brahman* is, of course, necessarily impersonal: it is not embodied. Ultimately, *Brahman* is beyond substance-attribute distinctions (*Nirguṇa Brahman*). On the other hand, *Brahman* is the *only substance* in the world: the cause of the universe, and the very reality that underpins it (*Saguṇa Brahman*). The apparent distinction (*Nirguṇa-Saguṇa*) is not a real distinction within *Brahman*, it is simply illustrative of the ‘limits of conventional language in describing *brahman*’ (Rambachan, 2006: 89). Rambachan elsewhere adds regarding the *Brahman* that ‘[i]ts nature transcends all definitions that are based on distinctions’ (2006: 89). Nevertheless, insofar as *Brahman* is the sole reality responsible for all existence, we might describe it as ‘substantial’. Indeed, as Rambachan points out, despite *Brahman* transcending all definitions and so on, ‘there is no object that enjoys a separate

ontological existence and nature from *brahman*' (2006: 88).⁴³ This speaks to the tension inherent in discussions of entities (though *Brahman* is technically beyond the concept 'entity') that allegedly transcend linguistic designations: nothing we say will ever capture anything about them from an ultimate perspective (and consequently, we cannot communicate any 'truths'). However, if *Brahman* is pure Being, then it must necessarily exist, and so whilst an Advaitin might be perturbed by the idea of imposing any such label onto the *Brahman*, I think it relatively uncontroversial to assert that according to Advaita, the *Brahman* is necessarily existent, and so is in an important respect, substantial.⁴⁴

I think that because Bhattacharya is beginning from an Advaitin position, he is always inclined to understand *ātman* in the Advaitin context. It is clear enough from his argument that he wants his readers to understand *ātman* in this way, too. It is possible, however, to understand this specific *ātman* in a weaker sense. Bearing in mind that the *Mahāyāna-Sūtrālaṃkāra* is, after all, a Buddhist text, I feel vindicated in taking this small step. If we choose to translate *ātman* as 'nature' in a weak sense rather than 'self' in the strong sense of a permanent, immutable essence, then the meaning of the extract changes a little. We now have a meaning more like

In utterly pure Emptiness, the Buddhas have attained to the summit of their *nature*, which consists in impersonality. Since they have

⁴³ To this end, Anderson also writes that 'it should be noted that Advaita Vedanta takes it for granted that there is 'being'. Its project, ontologically, is to clarify what this 'being' entails. By definition 'being' is not only that which cannot be *subrated* [sublated], but also cannot come into or go out of existence' (2012: 276). 'Being' is synonymous with '*Brahman*', and thus is substantial insofar as it is the *only existing thing*. All experienced phenomena enjoy reality only because they are *Brahman*.

⁴⁴ I feel it important to note that an incorporeal entity can still be substantial.

found, thus, their pure *nature*, they have reached the heights of their *nature*.

Or:

In pure emptiness, the Buddhas have achieved the pinnacle of their *nature*: a state of impersonality. Having discovered their pure *nature*, they have arrived at their supreme *nature*.⁴⁵

Leaving *ātman* untranslated leaves the door open to understanding it in the Advaitin sense advanced and preferred by Bhattacharya. Replacing *ātman* with *nature*, though, adds another possibility. No doubt an Advaitin would simply object that the *ātman-Brahman* simply *is* the nature of the world (and so of all that are within it). My slight change to the extract can, after all, still be read in such a manner. It can, however, also be read differently. In line with the orthodox Buddhist aversion to asserting ‘self’, we might understand the extract as using ‘nature’ in a conventional sense (and thus not necessarily implying any ultimate existence), then what we have is the Buddhist text simply using an empty concept (that is empty of *svabhāva*) to demonstrate a point.⁴⁶ What the Buddhists have realised in emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is thus that the nature of things is insubstantiality/impersonality, and this is the highest realisation regarding the nature of things. In other words, the greatest realisation about the nature of things is that all things lack intrinsic existence (*svabhāva*). This need not, and indeed *does not* imply that the ‘nature’ realised has a substantial existence behind it (and so can avoid recourse to something like the *Brahman*). Instead, it can simply be a concept, referred to for the sake of ease and

⁴⁵ *śūnyatāyāṃ viśuddhāyāṃ nairātmyātmāgralābhataḥ / buddhāḥ suddhātmalābhitvād gatā ātmamahātmatām //*

⁴⁶ Again, something is conventionally existent according to Buddhist terminology when it lacks an intrinsic existence (i.e. *svabhāva*). Something is ultimately existent when it possesses intrinsic existence (*svabhāva*).

communicability, without *really* referring to anything substantial. This could, I think, begin to form the basis of a coherent Madhyamaka interpretation.

I also note with some interest that translations of the commentary to the *Mahāyāna-Sūtrālaṃkāra* do not tend to specify whether or not their talk of *paramātman* – the ‘great self’ – is in a *saṃvṛti* or *paramārtha* sense. I think that we can deduce from Vasubandhu’s explication of the *trīsvabhāva* doctrine that both the verse and commentary are *saṃvṛti* and so nothing but conventional designations.⁴⁷ This means that any talk of own-nature of the *buddhas* is a conceptual construct that is ultimately unreal. The phrasing is the way it is to allow an unenlightened mind to comprehend the splendour of the awakened in a sort of metaphor. The buddhas have not *actually* climbed to the summit of the great *ātman*, because in the final analysis – the empty perfected aspect – such a thing is unreal. We can explain the use of ‘own-nature’ and ‘supreme self’ as used in both Thurman’s translation and the translation of the Dharmachakra Translation Committee in a more nuanced way. The own-nature referred to is – according to Vasubandhu’s *trīsvabhāva* – subject to the interplay of the three natures. The first

⁴⁷ Explaining the *trīsvabhāva*, Gold (2015: 149) writes that

[t]he first nature is the fabricated nature, which is the thing as it appears to be, as it is erroneously fabricated. Of course, to use this term (“fabricated”) is to indicate the acceptance that things do not really exist the way they appear. This is a thing’s nature as it might be defined and explained in ordinary Abhidharma philosophy – its traditional *svabhāva*, but with the added proviso that we all know that this is not really how things work. . . The second nature is the dependent nature, which Vasubandhu defines as the causal *process* of the thing’s fabrication, the causal story that brings about the thing’s apparent nature. The third nature, finally, is the emptiness of the first nature – the *fact* that it is unreal, that the appearance does not exist as it appears.

aspect of the three natures, *parikalpita*, is the *fabricated nature* or fabricated aspect. This is the thing as it *appears to exist* and is usually associated with *svabhāva*. The appearance is not real, as the Yogācārin knows. Therefore, the own-nature referred to in the commentary to IX.23 of the *Mahāyāna-Sūtrālaṃkāra* is an *appearance*, but it is not ultimately real. The second aspect is *paratantra*, or *dependent nature* or aspect. This is, as Gold (2015: 149) writes, the causal story that brings about the *parikalpita* nature. In the case of the own-nature of *buddhas*, we might say that the *paratantra* is the culmination of events, actions and personality traits that lead us to view them as having achieved the ‘great *ātman*’. It is the causal story that leads us to impose conceptual constructions onto the world. The final aspect, the *pariniṣpanna*, or *created nature* or aspect, is the emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of the fabricated nature: the knowledge that it is not intrinsically real and is an imposition resulting from a causal flux. In the case of the own-nature of the *buddhas* described at both *Mahāyāna-Sūtrālaṃkāra* IX.23 and in the corresponding commentary, we must now see that such an own-nature is unreal.

What we are left with, then, is a description that reifies emptiness as some sort of substantial entity. Asaṅga writes that it is within *śūnyatā* that the *buddhas* climb to the summit of the great self, implying that emptiness and selflessness (*anātman*) are *paramātman*. But by Vasubandhu’s own methodology, this conclusion cannot be left standing. The very fact that the own nature described is empty of intrinsic existence means that it is mischaracterised: a *svabhāva* is for Vasubandhu always *parikalpita*. When we apply Vasubandhu’s analysis, the passage actually alludes not to an *Upaniṣadic ātman-Brahman* as asserted by Bhattacharya above and suggested by Thurman in his footnotes to the 2004 translation of the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkārabhāṣya* (2004: 82, note 36), but to a denial of the ultimate existence of

that nature. The passage is *saṃvṛti* and so discusses and lauds the attributes of the *buddhas* in conventional, worldly language. What it does not do is give an ultimate account, at least if we use Vasubandhu's own arguments as a yardstick by which to measure the nature of phenomena. Reifying the emptiness of phenomena as a self, then, is anathema to Vasubandhu.⁴⁸ Applying his own account of *trīṣvabhāva*, we ought to come to the conclusion that the buddhas have achieved a great feat in realising that the nature of things is that there is not a nature of things. That is to say that they have seen that all phenomena lack *svabhāva* and no longer view the world in *svabhāvic* terms.

This is supported, I contend, by the subsequent verse's commentary, which provides arguments as to why Buddhahood is said to neither exist nor not exist. This is precisely because a *buddha* is selfless given that 'suchness' (thusness, relating to the *tathāgata*) is characterised 'by the (ultimate) nonexistence of persons and things' (Thurman, 2004: 82). A nature (*svabhāva*) is a thing, and so ultimately does not exist. It is also worth noting that part of the Sanskrit compound *pudgaladharmābhāvalakṣaṇatvāt* ('given that it is characterised by the nonexistence of *dharma*s and persons') uses the Sanskrit word for person, *pudgala*. This is not an interesting observation until we realise that for Vasubandhu, '*pudgala*' is a synonym for *ātman*. In the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (1991: 1327), Vasubandhu spends considerable time attacking Brahmin monks for contemplating the *ātman*. He writes that there is no *ātman*, no *pudgala*, over and above the *skandhas*. Talk of *ātman* and *pudgala*, thinks Vasubandhu, is simply a reification of impermanent impersonal interactions between the five *skandhas*. It is a mistake of

⁴⁸ Vasubandhu's attitudes to 'self', *svabhāva*, will be discussed in §4.

consciousness, which is itself causally conditioned by interactions between the mind (*manas*) and the *dharmas* that constitute the psycho-physical world (1991: 1326). Like all Buddhists, Vasubandhu thinks that ultimately, this mistaken reification can be addressed.

For Vasubandhu, then, buddhahood is characterised by the absence of ultimate entities, namely persons (substantial selves) and ‘things’ (*bhāva*: also ‘being’, ‘existing’). Natures (*svabhāva*) fall under the latter categorisation, and so ultimately, they cannot exist. There can be conventional ‘characteristics’ (*lakṣaṇa*) that describe a lack of something, and so there is no obvious problem here in arguing that a characteristic of Buddhahood is that there are no natures. We know that a characteristic can describe a privation because Vasubandhu uses the example of fading shadows in vision, claiming that a fading shadow cannot be said to be (ultimately) existent because ‘its characteristic is the nonexistence of heat or shadows’ (Thurman, 2004: 83).⁴⁹ Similarly, it cannot be said to be (ultimately) nonexistent either, because we experience the fading of shadows. The point is that a fading shadow does not exist *as it appears* (2004: 83).

With all that said, it is relatively easy to see how Bhattacharya might reach his conclusion that the *Mahāyāna-Sūtrālamkāra* supports his thesis that Buddhism aims at knowledge of the true *ātman-Brahman*. If we were to read the quotation only slightly differently, we could replace the idea of *ātman* with that of a specific understanding of *dharmakāya* and have next to no practical difference in meaning. Of course, *dharmakāya* is itself a troublesome notion that is often interpreted in radically different ways, and to some degree, this sort of difficulty is par for

⁴⁹ We might also say that a vegetarian foodstuff is characterised by a *lack* of meat. Anarchy is characterised by a *lack* of government, and so on. In the above cases, the designation ‘thusness’ and ‘buddhahood’ are characterised by a lack of permanent immutable phenomena.

the course when translating from Sanskrit.⁵⁰ The term itself loosely translates as *truth-body* (and was in its earliest forms most likely rendered as something like *the body of teachings* [of the Buddha]) but is understood differently depending on where we care to look. It is not unusual, for example, for *dharmakāya* to be understood as *reality-body*; the basis of reality, the underpinning substrate from which all must stem, the knowledge of which brings liberation. This is a normal, common theme in some Mahāyāna literature. It is not some fringe idea that operates outside of accepted Buddhist doctrine; it *is* accepted Buddhist doctrine for numerous Mahāyāna schools. Indeed, Tillemans writes that *dharmakāya* can be understood as ‘the Buddha’s omniscient mind or the buddhas’ omniscient minds (=jñānātmakadharmakāya, ye shes chos sku) or the absolute and unitary nature of those minds (=svābhāvikakāya, ngo bo nyid sku)’ (forthcoming: 6).

This talk of an essential, unconditioned substratum is the starting point for Bhattacharya’s thesis, and we can see that it is not without precedent. A featureless ultimate substratum from which the totality of the experienced world emanates could just as easily be the *ātman-Brahman* as it could be the Mahāyāna *dharmakāya*. This will be covered in detail in section 5. Before I get to any of that, though, I will proceed in fleshing out Bhattacharya’s own reasoning for his conclusion that the Buddha actually tacitly endorsed a sort of supreme *ātman*. Bhattacharya cites the commentary to the *Ratnagotravibhāga* – another Yogācāra text – at some length in both Sanskrit and in translation, in what I assume is an attempt to prove two things: first, that the

⁵⁰ I discuss in some detail how a Mādhyamika might opt to interpret a word and concept as troublesome as *dharmakāya* in §5.

‘fourfold misapprehension’ illustrates that there is an *ātman* to be discovered, and second that the concept of *nairātmya* is not, in fact, incompatible with that of *paramātman*. It is worth looking at both of these two points in some more detail. The fourfold misapprehension in particular is given significant attention. The translation given by Bhattacharya states that

The idea of the permanent in what is impermanent, of happiness in what is sorrowful, of the *ātman* in what is non-*ātman*, of the pure in what is impure, that is to say, in such things as corporeal form, etc., that is what is called the fourfold misapprehension.

(Bhattacharya, 2015: 3)

Again, Bhattacharya leaves *ātman* untranslated. If we were to translate it in the spirit of the paragraph, the relevant misapprehension would look something like ‘nature in what is not nature’, which is to say that it is a misapprehension to impose the idea of an essential nature onto something that lacks an essential nature. This is not necessarily to say that there are other things that possess or constitute an essential nature, but might simply mean that it is mistaken to reify natures when no natures can exist. This interpretation would be in line with the wider Buddhist doctrine of *anātman* and particularly in line with the Madhyamaka doctrine of *śūnyatā*. In the latter case, to seek nature in what is not nature is analogous to reifying *svabhāva* when none can be found: for the Mādhyamika, what is empty (*śūnya*) of *svabhāva* is necessarily without a nature or a self (*anātman*). As Bhattacharya elsewhere notes (2015: 144), possession of *svabhāva* is possession of an *ātman*, and so to lack *svabhāva* is to lack an *ātman*. In other words, it is not about seeking *ātman* in the wrong place with the implication that there is a *right* place to look, but about reifying *ātman* where there is no possibility of its existing.

Nevertheless, for Bhattacharya, that the *ātman* is being sought in what is non-*ātman* necessarily means that there must be something that *is ātman*. In other words, any negated object requires a real existent that is to be negated. On this point, Murti has this to say:

Negation itself is significant because there is an underlying reality – the subjacent ground. If there were no transcendent ground, how could any view be condemned as false? A view is false because it falsifies the real, makes the thing appear other than what it is in itself. Falsity implies the real that is falsified.

(Murti, 2016: 234-235)⁵¹

This view supports Bhattacharya's contention that in order for the Buddha to say what is *not ātman*, there must be something else that actually *is ātman*. It is an oft-repeated line, especially when talking about the conventional world of conditioned phenomena in Buddhism.⁵² In 2013, Giuseppe Ferraro, in criticism of the semantic interpretation of emptiness put forth by Mark Siderits, wrote that

A first evident logical weakness of semantic interpretation is that concepts such as 'conventionality' or 'conceptual being' are inconceivable without admitting some idea of reality or independent being. Therefore, the phrase "ultimate reality (PO) does not exist and everything is only conceptual reality (SO)" is

⁵¹ Also cited in Bhattacharya (2015: 36).

⁵² The significance of the difference between the two truths of 'conventional' and 'ultimate' is mentioned in *MMK* 24.8-9:

*dve satye samupāśritya buddhānāṃ dharmadeśanā /
lokasaṃvṛtisatyam ca satyam ca paramārthataḥ //8//
ye 'nayor vijānti vibhāgaṃ satyayor dvayoḥ /
te tattvaṃ na vijānanti gambhīre buddhaśāsane //9//*

The Dharma-instruction of the Buddha rests on two truths: conventional truth and ultimate truth. [Those] who do not know the distinction between the two truths, they do not understand the Buddha's profound teaching.

inconsistent from a logical point of view. Indeed, if we exclude that 'real' might exist beyond the conceptual, we are not 'eliminating reality' but are rather saying that the conceptual is the only 'real'.

(Ferraro, 2013: 211)

Ferraro is really disputing the efficiency of dealing with the two-truths through the lens of the semantic interpretation and so his immediate focus is slightly different to that of Bhattacharya, but the underlying point is the same: we can only negate something in virtue of its actual existence. Where Bhattacharya thinks that we can only deny what is not *ātman* in virtue of there being something else that *is ātman*, Ferraro thinks that we can only make sense of conventional (conditioned) existents in virtue of there being ultimate (unconditioned) existents that transcend the conventional: the *ātman-Brahman* is one such existent. The *ātman-Brahman* is, according to Bhattacharya, entirely compatible with the Buddhist doctrine of insubstantiality (2015: 11) in virtue of its own incorporeality (2015: 5-6). On such a reading, scholars of Buddhism like Ferraro appear to support Bhattacharya's overarching thesis: there simply *must* be some ultimately real hyper-reality that grounds existing beings.

We have, though, compelling reason to question the way in which 'real' is used by both Ferraro and Bhattacharya.⁵³ Contained within such uses of 'real' is – unsurprisingly – the idea of a deeper reality with a privileged ontology, and this is, at least on the surface of things, particularly un-Buddhist. Indeed, whilst Ferraro manages to stop short of claiming that the real is incorporeal (instead arguing that the real is simply a mind-independent existence (Ferraro,

⁵³ 'Thus, it is not outside of ourselves that we grasp the Real: through all eternity the Real is present in us, but we do not see it, blinded as we are by our false conceptions' (Bhattacharya, 2015: 10).

2013: 211)), Bhattacharya does not, claiming that the real is simply the *ātman-Brahman*. This is in turn our essential nature (further, it is the essential nature of everything), our true incorporeal being.

We now have a situation where not only are negations assumed to require an ultimate reality or existent in order to make any sense, but the ultimate reality so assumed is treated as something existent that is there to be discovered or known. In making this move, both Ferraro and Bhattacharya fail to recognise that a discussion of – and negation of – a concept like the *ātman* or the ultimately real (I make this distinction because Ferraro does not equate his idea of ultimate reality with the *ātman*) does not actually depend on the independent existence of an *ātman* or ultimate reality. A Buddhist thinker need not accept that the *ātman* exists in order to state that the *skandhas* do not constitute it. All that is required is the recognition that an idea or concept is under discussion, and regardless of whether or not this concept has a corresponding existent entity, simply knowing what the concept means and entails is enough to facilitate a discussion of it. In other words, all the Buddhist really need acknowledge is the *concept* of the *ātman*.

It thus strikes me that in saying ‘these things are not *ātman*’, the Buddhist need not implicitly affirm a belief in the *ātman*, but need only be speaking to their opponent in mutually understood terms. When a Madhyamaka thinker reduces all empirical things to the ‘conventional’ level, they are not necessarily admitting to the existence of two distinct levels of existence with ‘conventional’ somehow beneath the privileged ontology afforded to existents on the ‘ultimate’ level. In fact, all they really need admit to is either their understanding of the

Buddhist proclivity to explain experience via ‘ultimate’ existents, or their recognition that there *appears* to be two-levels of truth (and thus existence), and are simply talking in terms that other Buddhists – and indeed non-Buddhists – would understand; presumably before jettisoning such notions.⁵⁴ They need not believe an ultimate plane *actually* exists in order to dispute how it might theoretically work, just as I need not believe that God exists in order to make sense of a conversation about the attributes of God with an atheist. I can talk of Harry Potter-style Dementors with my young cousin, but I think it a stretch to say that either of us need accept their actual existence in the empirical world (though maybe my cousin would!).

Another convenient way to think of this is as follows: it is not necessary for a unicorn to exist independently in the world for me to dispute with a friend that it is not the same as or equivalent with the Minotaur. If my friend says ‘this unicorn is the Minotaur’, I can reasonably respond with ‘that unicorn is not the Minotaur’ despite my knowledge that neither the unicorn nor the Minotaur empirically exist in the world. In so doing, I cannot reasonably be accused of tacitly affirming the ultimate existence of both unicorns and Minotaurs. All that is really demonstrated is that both my friend and I understand what the idea of a unicorn involves (its status as a horse with a horn growing from its head) and what the idea of the Minotaur involves (its status as a creature with the body of a man and the head of a bull).⁵⁵ We can say that as long as we understand the *idea* or concept of something, it does not much matter if it exists

⁵⁴ This jettisoning of conceptual thought is, I believe, the crux of Madhyamaka thought. Throughout the course of this paper, we will see some similarities with Advaita in this regard, too.

⁵⁵ Obviously, we need to understand what a horse, horn, man and bull are, too.

independently of the mind or if it does not. Being able to categorise ideas is what really matters, not whether there ever existed entities or objects falling under those ideas. The same understanding can be applied to Siderits' argument regarding the Madhyamaka use of 'conventional' as critiqued by Ferraro. The Mādhyamika need not accept the existence of an ultimate plane to 'ground' the reality of empirical objects or of anything else. Instead, all they really need is an understanding of the theoretical implications of the 'ultimate', so that when they refer to the two-truths, they do so with a specific goal in mind: eventually dispelling any and all notions of ultimacy because notions of ultimacy qualify as metaphysical views (and metaphysical views lead to attachment).⁵⁶ It is a simple fact that an entity need not exist independently of mind in order to be talked about or entertained in thought.

Given the Buddha's famed propensity for avoiding extremes and advocating a 'middle way', it is at least possible that his apparent hesitance to deny *ātman* outright (instead choosing only to say what does not constitute the *ātman*, namely identifying the *ātman* as corporeal, as resulting from the *skandhas*) stems from a reluctance to commit to either a permanently existent or a nonexistent *ātman*. This would, after all, present as either an eternalist or annihilationist point of view: both are to be avoided according to the principle of the middle way.

Bhattacharya, we have seen, also believes that the *ātman* is '*ātman* in the sense of the own-nature of the Buddhas', and in his footnotes, he endorses the position of K. Venkata

⁵⁶ This relies on reading Madhyamaka philosophy according to the semantic interpretation of emptiness, a position to which I am generally sympathetic. I also acknowledge, however, that this is not the only reading, or indeed the dominant reading of Madhyamaka.

Ramanan, which equates *svabhāva*, *svarūpa* and the *ātman* with ‘the essential nature...of the individual as well as of all things’ (Bhattacharya, 2015: 114, note 249). When translating a section of the commentary to the *Ratnagotravibhāga* in support of his position, Bhattacharya writes that the Buddha, because of his ‘perfect knowledge’ of the natures of things (*yathābhūtajñānena*), has achieved perfect intuition of the impersonality/selflessness of all *dharma*s (*sarvadharmānairātmyaparapāramiprāptaḥ*). The translation continues ‘This impersonality accords, from every point of view, with the characteristics of the *ātman*. It is thus always regarded as *ātman*, because it is Impersonality which is *ātman*’ (2015: 4-5). The point being driven home here is that the *ātman*-Brahman of the *Upaniṣads* is something of which nothing can ultimately be said – a notion we covered in some detail earlier. On this reading, it seems to me that it is not just Buddhist impersonality or *anātman* which is thus identical with the *Brahman*, but also Maimonides’ conception of God, and, indeed, any mystical conception of a godhead or Absolute which admits of an attribute-less transcendent reality.

The Sanskrit relating to this point as presented in Bhattacharya’s book: ‘*tac cāsyānairātmyam anātmalakṣaṇena yathādarśanam avisaṃvāditatvāt sarvakalam ātmābhipretaḥnairātmyam evātmēti kṛtvā*’ (2015: 3). This, using Bhattacharya’s own translation as a basis, translates as something like ‘this impersonality accords, in every way, with the characteristics of *anātman* (*anātmalakṣaṇena*), it is thus always accepted as *ātman*, it is impersonality/no-self which is *ātman*.’ In note 19 on page 41, Bhattacharya makes the point – albeit in a laboured way – that he wants to convey that on the one hand, the views of adepts of other doctrines are ‘contradictory to the characteristics of *ātman*’; on the other hand, despite this, the view of the Buddha in some ways nevertheless accords with these seemingly contradictory views.

Let us dwell on this apparent paradox for a moment. Does the Buddha's view of *ātman* coincide with that of the *anyatīrthyāḥ* or not? Word substitutions aside, Bhattacharya says of this that 'on the one hand, the view of the *anyatīrthyāḥ* is contradictory to the characteristics of the *ātman* (*ātmalakṣaṇena viśaṃvāditatvāt*); on the other hand, the view of the Tathāgatas accords with them' (2015: 41, note 19). What exactly is at stake here? We might think of it like this: the view of the *anyatīrthyāḥ* (an adept of another doctrine, viz. a non-Buddhist) is to seek *ātman* where *ātman* is not, and so in virtue of their looking in the wrong places and associating the wrong things with the *ātman*, the non-Buddhist's idea of *ātman* is necessarily always *anātman*, or not-*ātman*. It is, as Bhattacharya puts it, 'at variance with the characteristics of the *ātman*' (2015: 4) simply in virtue of it *not being the ātman*. Bhattacharya's point here, though subtle, is that first, the *anyatīrthyāḥ* and the Buddha are in accord insofar as they are both seeking *ātman* in the first instance, but are in opposition regarding both the means by which and the places in which it is to be sought. For his part, the Buddha also arrives at *anātman*, but does so in a different, more deliberate way, the end goal of which is – paradoxically – to gain knowledge of what *is* the *ātman* by filtering out those phenomena that are *not* the *ātman*. In such a case, the impersonality of *dharmas* is the essence of *anātman* when applied to mundane things (a reified 'I' as conceived via the *skandhas* and so on), and realisation of this impersonality is similarly the true state of the Absolute (or, as Bhattacharya would say, of the spiritual *ātman-Brahman*).⁵⁷

⁵⁷ This is essentially identical to the position in some Mahāyānist schools that sees emptiness as the essence of all phenomena and thus the true character of the Absolute. It is often argued that some Mādhyamikas also subscribe to this viewpoint. Murti, for his part advances the view that Madhyamaka has at its heart a conception of an

To put it in other words, the Buddha's perfect insight allows him to perceive the impersonality of worldly phenomena, and it is this impersonality that constitutes the character of the true *ātman* (viz. the *ātman-Brahman*). Now we can say that impersonality accords with *anātman* because *anātman* is the impersonality of *dharma*s that are mistakenly reified as *ātman*. Bhattacharya thinks that when the Buddha gained perfect knowledge of the impersonality of *dharma*s (*sarvadharmānairātmyaparapāramiprāptaḥ*), he actually gained knowledge of the *Upaniṣadic ātman-Brahman* (on the Śāṅkaran reading).⁵⁸ That is to say that, counter-intuitive as it seems, the realisation of *anātman* in *dharma*s is also the realisation of a unified, transcendent absolute *ātman* underpinning the universe (though it is beyond the empirical reality of the universe): the *real ātman* – as opposed to those things mistaken for *ātman* – is the impersonality of the transcendent Absolute. Impersonality accords in every way with the principles of *anātman* (because realising *anātman* through meditative practice leads one to the realisation of the impersonality of all phenomena), and so 'it [impersonality] is always accepted as *ātman*' (2015: 5) precisely because the nature of the *true ātman* is the nondual impersonality of *Brahman*. The *anyatīrthyāḥ* would then, according to Bhattacharya, be in agreement with the Buddha that there is an *ātman* of some description, the difference comes in the methodology involved in gaining

Absolute (2016: 234), but whilst I acknowledge that this position endures in some Madhyamaka sects today, there are good reasons to question whether or not it is representative of Nāgārjuna's position as expounded in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*.

⁵⁸ This turn of phrase might sound clumsy, but it is rather difficult to express in language how a person comes to know the *ātman-Brahman*. Merely speaking of 'realisation' of, or 'attainment' of, the *ātman-Brahman* necessarily makes the *ātman-Brahman* an object or result of some action (Suthren Hirst 2005: 39-40). This cannot actually be the case, as the *ātman-Brahman* simply is, regardless of a subject-object relationship. As such, we need to bear in mind that for Śāṅkara 'knowledge of brahman is not knowledge of an object but the state in which all objectivising superimpositions have been removed' (Suthren Hirst, 2005: 40). Whenever I refer to 'realising' the *Brahman*, then, it is very much with this difficulty borne in mind, and I am not seeking to objectify that which cannot be objectified (viz. the *ātman-Brahman*), but simply communicating a change in state on behalf of the practitioner.

knowledge of it. The *anyatīrthyāḥ* grasps at things that are emphatically *not ātman* in a misguided pursuit of what *is ātman*, whereas the Buddha eschews this type of grasping and realises that impersonality is the true nature of the *ātman*, and the means by which this is realised is by successfully determining that which is *anātman*.

2.2 Abhidharmic *Dharma* Theory

Bhattacharya supposes that if *dharma*s are the building blocks of experience and are, as argued by Nāgārjuna (among others), impersonal, then it is precisely this impersonality that constitutes the true intrinsic nature of all phenomena. In such an instance, emptiness would be the *svabhāva* of all phenomena. Is this a satisfactory account? In order to answer this, we will need to give some account of what *dharma* theory actually entails. Y. Karunadasa (1996: 2) writes that

The *dhamma* [*dharma*] theory was not peculiar to any one school of Buddhism but penetrated all the early schools, stimulating the growth of their different versions of the Abhidhamma... There are sound reasons for believing that the Pāli Abhidhamma Piṭaka contains one of the earliest forms of *dhamma* theory, perhaps even the oldest version.

Karunadasa argues that whilst *dharma* theory is, strictly speaking, an Abhidharma innovation, the method of analysis present in early Buddhist scriptures demonstrates a clear link between the formative Buddhist investigations into the empirical world and the more developed *dharma* theories of the various Abhidharmas. How then can this relation be traced? Karunadasa thinks that the early Buddhist modes of investigation are mutually-dependent – a reasonable assumption given the Buddha's famed emphasis on *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent

origination).⁵⁹ Further, Karunadasa holds that this interdependence can be divided into five modes of analysis that work something like this: first, analysis of *nāmarūpa* (1996: 3-4). This is a *dvandva* compound that translates as *name* and *form*.⁶⁰ It designates the two basic aspects of the empirical person: mental aspects (*nāma*) and physical aspects (*rūpa*) (1996: 3). The second mode of analysis is that of the five *skandhas*,⁶¹ the third that of the six elements (*dhatus*),⁶² the fourth that of the twelve *āyatanas* (the six sense faculties and their corresponding objects),⁶³ and the fifth that of the eighteen *dhatus*. These are ‘an elaboration of the immediately preceding mode obtained by the addition of the six kinds of consciousness which arise from the contact between the sense organs and their objects’ (Karunadasa 1996: 4). This laborious journey through the five modes of analysis is not in vain. Karunadasa argues that the reasoning behind each mode of analysis varies, each preceding mode is further analysable by its succeeding mode (1996: 5). This result, whether by design or by coincidence, is an endorsement of the principle of *pratītyasamutpāda*: ‘It is in fact with reference to these five kinds of analysis that Buddhism frames its fundamental doctrines. The very fact that there are at least five kinds of analysis shows

⁵⁹ Dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) is the thesis that all things are affected by innumerable causes and conditions and lack an ultimate, singular grounding start point. This especially applies to the twelve *nidānas* that account for the causal relationship that produces (from the start point of *avidyā* (ignorance)) *samsāra* and so *duḥkha*. In this sense, it is a fundamental Buddhist doctrine.

⁶⁰ A *dvandva* compound has the same meaning as a series of nouns followed by *ca* (‘and’), and so in this case, *nāma rūpa ca*; name form and; name and form.

⁶¹ The five *skandhas* (Pāli: *khandhas*) are *rūpa* (body), *vedanā* (sensation), *saṃjñā* (conceptual thought), *saṃskāra* (mental formations; dispositions of character), and *viññāna* (discernment; sense-based perception).

⁶² These elements are said to be earth, water, temperature, air, space, and consciousness (Karunadasa 1996: 3).

⁶³ Predictably, the *āyatanas* are eyes-visible form; ears-sound; nose-smells; tongue-tastes; body-touch; mind-mental objects.

that none of them can be taken as final or absolute’ [my emphasis] (1996: 4). This is an important point. Whereas Bhattacharya thinks that there *is* a final mode of analysis (one that results in knowledge of the impersonal *ātman-Brahman*), Karunadasa writes that the whole purpose of these modes of analysis in early Buddhism is to ‘prevent the intrusion of the notions of “mine,” “I,” and “my self” into what is otherwise an impersonal and egoless congeries of mental and physical phenomena’ (1996: 4). This changes slightly, he notes, with the advent of the various Abhidharmas, at which point ‘the Abhidhammic doctrine of *dhammas* developed from an attempt to draw out the full implications of these five types of analysis’ (1996: 4-5). At this point, the analysis of the world into *dhammas* is indeed seen as final, though there is still a doctrinal aversion to imputing a unitary transempirical reality.

So far we can see both a difference and a similarity to Bhattacharya’s position. First, Karunadasa forces the point that the analyses present in Buddhist literature prior to *dharma* theory cannot be final or absolute, for reasons that will be explained shortly. Further, he eventually argues that ‘the Pāli Abhidhamma Piṭaka did not succumb to this error of conceiving the *dhammas* [dharmas] as ultimate entities or discrete entities’ (1996: 8), instead portraying *dhammas* as simple epistemic tools, the utility of which is in their being used to give accounts of specific instantiations of experience. This point is strengthened by Noa Ronkin (and at some length) when she argues that for the early Abhidharmas at least, the *svabhāva* of *dhammas* was *not* thought of as essential in the way that Bhattacharya is using the word (Ronkin, 2005: 93).⁶⁴

⁶⁴ On this, Noa Ronkin (2005: 94) writes that

The consequence of this is that for the early Abhidharma at least, neither *dharmas* nor their *svabhāva* can reasonably be equated with *ātman* as essential nature. Bhattacharya, as we have seen, characterises this ultimate impersonality as the *svarūpa* and *svabhāva* of all things. If this impersonality is the *svabhāva* of *dharmas*, then the *dharmas* are essentially characterised by something that is ultimately existent. Their reality is nothing else but the *ātman-Brahman*, which pervades and is the support of all existence. Whilst Bhattacharya holds that the *ātman-Brahman* is *ultimately* beyond conceptualisation, then, he must nevertheless always hold that it is Real: in fact, it is the *only* Reality. We can ‘know’ that the *ātman-Brahman* is the fundamental reality – the Absolute – intellectually through scriptural direction and argument, but it takes something extra to know it through experience. Śāṅkara calls this latter form of knowledge of the *ātman-Brahman* ‘*anubhava*’ (self-experience). It is, of course, the latter form of ‘knowledge’ that really counts – true self-knowledge (*ātmabodha*) is attained only through experience. This same experience has to be directed by scripture in accordance with Śāṅkara’s emphasis on *śruti* – at least in the initial stages.

The difference is that the Buddhists, it seems, do not want to make this a commitment to an unconditioned monistic first cause, and for good reason. Karunadasa sketches the way in

[t]he Paṭisambhidāmagga endorses a broad notion of *sabhāva* as the nature that the dhammas essentially share, but it is by no means clear that this nature necessarily defines what a dhamma is, or that a dhamma exists by virtue of this nature that it possesses... Nowhere is it stated that a dhamma is defined, determined or exists by its *sabhāva*...

By ‘essentially’ here, Ronkin is not referring to an ultimate, unconditioned essence. Instead, she is referring to an individuating feature, something that serves to determine *x* entity from *y* entity. This is clearly much more mundane than the sense in which Bhattacharya uses ‘essential’ when equating *ātman*, *svabhāva*, and *svarūpa*: in this sense, ‘essential’ points to the unconditioned ultimate principle that is responsible for all existence. Such an account, thinks Ronkin, makes far too strong an ontological claim.

which *svabhāva* (Pāli: *sabhāva*) became associated with ultimacy (or ‘the highest’ (level of analysis); Pāli: *paramattha*, Skt.: *paramārtha*), writing that *dharma*s eventually came to be understood as ‘the final limits into which empirical existence can be analysed’ (1996: 19). As the ‘highest’ level of analysis, *dharma*s became associated with *paramārtha*, the implication being that ‘*dhammas* [Skt.: *dharma*s] are ultimate existents with no possibility of further reduction’ (1996: 19). Karunadasa adds that it was from this point that ‘own-nature (*sabhāva*) [Skt.: *svabhāva*] came to be further defined as ultimate nature (*paramattha-sabhāva*)’ (1996: 19). Can we equate *this* type of ultimate nature with that endorsed by Bhattacharya? It appears as though there is some degree of convergence between the position of Bhattacharya and the Abhidharma position put forth by Karunadasa. Bhattacharya wants to claim that the ultimate nature (what Karunadasa refers to in Pāli as the *paramattha-sabhāva*) of all *dharma*s is the impersonal unconditioned Absolute. The ultimate nature of *dharma*s is the *ātman-Brahman*. But how does this sit with Karunadasa’s account? At first glance, there might be a similarity: Karunadasa explains that

the mental as well as the material *dhammas* are not actually separable one from another. In the case of the mental *dhammas*, the term used is *samsaṭṭha* (conjoined); in the case of the material *dhammas*, the term used is *avinibbhoga* (inseparable). This raises the question why the *dhammas* are presented as a plurality.

(1996: 24)

There is more to this than meets the eye, however. Karunadasa is quick to add that despite not being strictly separable, *dharma*s are nevertheless *distinguishable*. The claim is not that *dharma*s are all essentially the same thing (viz. the impersonal *ātman-Brahman*), or even that they all originate from the same thing (again the *ātman-Brahman*). It is simply that we can

tell what they are in relation to each other if we correctly analyse them. Indeed, Karunadasa writes that '[i]t is this distinguishability that serves as the foundation of the *dhamma* theory' (1996: 24).⁶⁵ Also significant is that for the early Abhidharma systems, the *dhammas* are not strictly unconditioned, regardless of their 'ultimate' status. They are viewed as ultimate very simply because the Ābhidharmikas thought that all analysis of experience stopped with them. They are foundational only insofar as analysis of experience bottoms out with them – this does not necessarily mean that they have to be assigned some sort of ontological primacy of the type that Bhattacharya is keen to impose. In fact, the *dhammas* are indeed said to have conditioned origination (Pāli: *sappaccatata*), and Karunadasa helpfully describes five axiomatic reasons why this is accepted to be the case. All five of these reasons are relevant in one way or another to the current discussion, and so I shall quote Karunadasa's explanations verbatim:

(i) It is not empirically possible to identify an absolute original cause of the "dhammic" process. Such a metaphysical conception is not in accord with Buddhism's empirical doctrine of causality, the purpose of which is not to explain how the world began but to describe the uninterrupted continuity of the saṃsāric process whose absolute beginning is not conceivable. In this connection it must also be remembered that as a system of philosophy the Abhidhamma is descriptive and not speculative.

(ii) Nothing arises without the appropriate conditions necessary for its origination. This rules out the theory of fortuitous origination (*adhiḥcasamuppannavāda*).

(iii) Nothing arises from a single cause. This rules out theories of a single cause (*ekakāraṇavāda*). Their rejection is of great significance, showing that the Abhidhammic view of existence rejects all monistic theories which seek to explain the origin of the

⁶⁵ It is important for us to remember that the various *dharma/dhamma* theories are not prescriptive or speculative, but descriptive. They do not aim to prescribe an account of the world, but to give a full analysis of the world as experienced.

world from a single cause, whether this single cause is conceived as a personal God or an impersonal Godhead. It also serves as a critique of those metaphysical theories which attempt to reduce the world of experience to an underlying transempirical principle.

(iv) Nothing arises singly, as a solitary phenomenon. Thus on the basis of a single cause or on the basis of a plurality of causes, a single effect does not arise. The invariable situation is that there is always a plurality of effects. It is on the rejection of the four views referred to above that the Abhidhammic doctrine of conditionality is founded.

(v) From a plurality of conditions, a plurality of effects takes place. Applied to the *dhamma* theory, this means that a multiplicity of *dhammas* brings about a multiplicity of other *dhammas*.

(Karunadasa, 1996: 25-26)

It is easy to see why Bhattacharya chose not to rely on the intricacies of Abhidharmic Buddhism to bolster his theory. On the above evidence, the Abhidharma system of analysis flatly denies that any monistic understanding is possible. Despite *dhammas* being ultimately real ('the ultimate, irreducible data of empirical existence' (Karunadasa, 1996: 20)) they do not, according to the early Ābhidharmikas, share the same intrinsic nature in the way that Bhattacharya would need them to. Bhattacharya claims that the true nature of all *dhammas* is their insubstantial impersonality – he equates this with what Nāgārjuna calls *śūnyatā* (emptiness). But we need to be careful about how we characterise this impersonality. For the Ābhidharmikas, each *dharma* simply *is* its intrinsic nature. This means in turn that each *dharma* – in virtue of being distinguishable – has a distinct nature that serves to distinguish it as *x dharma* as opposed to *y dharma* rather than simply having the *ātman-Brahman* as their nature. For somebody like Nāgārjuna, the difference is even starker. He does not agree with the Ābhidharmikas that each *dharma* has an (or is its) intrinsic nature precisely because he believes that nothing possesses (or

‘is’) an intrinsic nature to begin with. Further, he does not think that ultimately real *dharma*s can be conditioned or arise from causes and conditions in the way that Karunadasa outlines above.

Indeed, the very first chapter of the *MMK* is an attack on the notion of *dharma*s possessing (or being) intrinsic natures (Skt.: *svabhāva*, Pāli: *sabhāva*) whilst also being subject to causes and conditions. The basic idea is that *dharma*s (and so *svabhāva*) cannot be ultimate entities and also be reliant on causes and conditions for their existence because this would necessitate some sort of change in that *dharma*. If *dharma*s are equivalent with their intrinsic natures, then change is impossible.⁶⁶ Karunadasa writes, ‘to claim that [a *dharma*’s] intrinsic nature undergoes modification is to deny its very existence’ (1996: 21): an obvious issue.

⁶⁶ See all of *MMK* 1 for the totality of this argument. This particular point is perhaps made most forcefully between *MMK* 1.6-10:

*naivāsato naiva sataḥ pratyayo ‘rthasya yujyate /
asataḥ pratyayaḥ kasya sataś ca pratyayena kim //6//*

*na san nāsan na sadasan dharmo nirvatate yadā /
kathaṃ nirvatako betur evaṃ sati hi yujyate //7//*

*anārambaṇa evāyaṃ san dharma upadiśyate /
anthānārambaṇe dharme kuta ārambaṇaṃ punaḥ //8//*

*anutpanneṣu dharmeṣu nirodho nopapadyate /
nānantaram ato yuktaṃ niruddhe pratyayaś ca kaḥ //9//*

*bhāvānām niḥsvabhāvānām na sattā vidyante yataḥ /
satīdam asmin bhavatītyetan naivopapadyate //10//*

A condition of an effect that is existent or non-existent is not accepted /
Of what [use] are conditions for nonexistents? And for whom [is there use in]
conditions for existents? //6//

When no *dharma* operates that is existent, nonexistent or both existent and nonexistent /
How in this case can [something be called] an operative cause (*nirvatakahetu*)? //7//

Karunadasa tells us that *dharmas* appear in clusters: ‘a psychic instance can never occur with less than eight constituents, i.e. consciousness and its seven invariable concomitants’ (1996: 26). He adds that the relation between the different *dharmas* in a cluster is ‘one of necessary conascence’ (Pāli: *niyata-sahajāta*; being born or originated together/at the same time) as part of ‘a complex correlational system’: the implication of this is that there are no singular, solitary phenomena (1996: 26).

What Karunadasa has outlined is an awkward though not strictly paradoxical position – the claim appears to be that *dharmas* are at once both inseparable (and so unitary) and also distinguishable (and so a plurality). This simply does not work for Bhattacharya if *dharmas* are ultimate existents sharing the same ultimate nature (viz. the *ātman-Brahman*), and it is likely that this tension influenced his dismissal of Abhidharma doctrine; he instead claims that it was the Mahāyāna that eventually ‘put things right’ (2015: 39) with the doctrine of emptiness. This is a position that he interprets as stating that the world is composed of entities that share the same impersonal nature: that of a transcendent *ātman-Brahman*.

Bhattacharya refers to the Buddha’s seeing all *dharmas* and recognising their impersonality as true knowledge of *ātman-Brahman*. Bhattacharya agrees in principle with the

It has been taught that *dharmas* [existents] have no objective support /
But [where there is] no objective support, again, why [posit] an objective support? //8//

When *dharmas* are unproduced [by conditions], cessation does not occur /
When [a *dharma* has] ceased, what [is a] condition? Thus, a direct condition is not suitable. //9//

Since things without intrinsic nature are not [ultimately] existent /
‘This existing, that comes to be’ does not obtain. //10//

Buddha that all *dharma*s are insubstantial/impersonal: he cites the Buddha's *sarvadharmānairātmyaparapāramiprāptaḥ* – his perfect intuition of the insubstantiality of all *dharma*s – as evidence of the Buddha's enlightenment. For Bhattacharya, this enlightenment is, of course, in full agreement with Advaitin doctrine, at least where the ultimate impersonality of all (conventionally) existent things is concerned (Bhattacharya, 2015: 4-5).

Second, there is some similarity between Karunadasa's account and Bhattacharya's argument: *ultimately*, the *ātman-Brahman* is impersonal and is devoid of dualistic notions such as 'self' and 'other', of 'me' or of 'you'. I suspect, then, that Bhattacharya would take Karunadasa's argument about the Buddhist modes of analysis and drive the point that whilst they go about things in a slightly different way (viz. in aiming to buttress introspection against ideas of self rather than examining and gaining knowledge of the self), the final result is identical. The culmination of both Buddhist and Advaitin efforts is, for Bhattacharya, arrival at knowledge of and experience of an egoless, pure (lacking defilements), unconditioned Absolute.

Bhattacharya endorses the position that this incorporeal *ātman* is at once impersonal and Absolute, and holds that 'to know the *ātman-Brahman* is, in effect, to become it...as long as we do nothing but conceive of it, we are far from knowing it' (2015: 7-8). It is here that we really see how realising impersonality/no-self can aid our achievement of realising the true self, the *ātman-Brahman*: the point is to *become* the *ātman-Brahman* and thus remove the subject-object dualism that blights our day-to-day life. He writes that failing to *become* the *ātman-Brahman*, and persisting to merely conceive of it, or assign attributes to the concept of it means that '...the *ātman*, the Self, remains an object to us, and, therefore, a non-Self' (2015: 8). The use of 'non-

self' here is slightly subtler than previous usages, and it is determining the instance in which the *actual ātman* can be misapprehended rather than determining instances in which entirely the wrong things are taken as *ātman*. It is as though the practitioner is on the right tracks, but has, in holding onto a preconceived notion of the *ātman-Brahman*, scuppered their chances of actually realising it. The very act of loading the *ātman-Brahman* with conceptual constructions detracts from its *actual* status as Absolute, corrupts the mind pursuing it and makes it *anātman*, a non-self in the most basic form of the expression. The *ātman-Brahman* is supposed to be necessarily inexpressible in positive terms because it is beyond linguistic designation. This is, at least, the view of Śāṅkara's Advaita. It is in one sense useful to conceive of the *ātman-Brahman* in the early stages of spiritual development – it is probably even necessary if the diligent practitioner wishes to arrive at it in the proper way (why would practitioners bother to devote themselves to realising something that has no positive impact?) – but it is simply not enough on its own, and continuing to 'see' it in this manner is to miss out on it altogether.

Bhattacharya explains that '[a]ll truths as can be formulated are, in fact, but approximations of Truth, which is inexpressible; none of them can be identified with Truth itself' (2015: 9). 'Truth' in this context is synonymous with 'Absolute' or 'ultimate', or, unsurprisingly, *ātman*: only the *ātman-Brahman* is 'Truth' per se, as it is the totality of Being. Bhattacharya, in a passage that would not be out of place in any Madhyamaka textbook, says of approximate truths

that '[t]hey aid us in reaching [*ultimate* Truth], they guide our progress towards it; but they must be transcended if it is to be reached' (2015: 9).⁶⁷

In any case, successfully reaching this state of Being and *becoming* the *ātman-Brahman* is, for Bhattacharya, synonymous with the Buddhist goal of reaching *nirvāṇa* (2015: 11). Liberation is to see the emptiness of phenomena; it is their impersonality. This is why Bhattacharya must reject Abhidharmic *dharma* theory and try to embrace (a version of) Nāgārjuna's vision of *śūnyatā*. If many *svabhāvas* exist, then Bhattacharya's thesis fails, for all existence has but *one* intrinsic nature: the impersonal *ātman-Brahman*. This is fundamental. It is the 'most profound spiritual reality' in which one can dwell, as the '*ātman* is the ultimate Reality upon which the empirical world is founded' (2015: 12), or in other words, it is the ultimate that provides the basis for the conventional. For Śāṅkara, 'the entire expanse of [empirical] things is mere illusion' and not ultimately real: only Brahman is ultimately real (Śāṅkara, 2009: 138).

2.3 An Early Buddhist Rejection of Brahman?

We know that the concept of *anātman* (Pāli: *anattā*) is now synonymous with Buddhism and that it in principle rejects the idea of any persistent *ātman*. We also know that Bhattacharya thinks that the real purpose of the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman* is to deny a *specific type of ātman* and not to deny the *ātman in toto*: Bhattacharya, as we have seen, makes the argument

⁶⁷ The use of 'truth' (small 't') and 'Truth' (capital 'T') here is significant and is reminiscent of (though not identical with) Madhyamaka discussion of conventional and ultimate (truth; reality). Bhattacharya is splitting the world into two levels here: that of 'truth', a conventional designation that is but an inferior approximation of the ultimate 'Truth', which is inexpressible yet able to be experienced.

that the type of *ātman* rejected is only the empirical *jīva* and not the reality behind it, the *ātman-Brahman*. Thus, *anātman* only applies to things that a person mistakenly takes to be *ātman*: the things that we wrongly invest in as parts of ourselves are *anātman*, whereas the *true ātman* is the *ātman-Brahman*. Such an understanding trades on the early Buddhist literature specifying that which cannot be *ātman* (namely anything that comes under the remit of the *skandhas*) rather than denying *ātman* outright. Alexander Wynne writes of this general approach that ‘the five aggregates are impermanent, subject to change and so unsuitable to be regarded as one’s *ātman*’ (2009: 61).⁶⁸ Wynne agrees with Bhattacharya when he notes that much of the earliest Buddhist discourse regarding *ātman* does, in fact, tell us *where not to look* rather than proscribing searching *per se*. Citing from numerous Buddhist sources including the *Catuṣpariṣat Sūtra* of the Mūlasarvāstivāda (2009: 60), the *Māhavastu* of the Mahāsāṃghika (2009: 60-61), and the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (2009: 63) to illustrate the focus of the early Buddhist texts, Wynne shows that it does indeed look to be the case that the very earliest Buddhist scripture concerns itself only with refuting *ātman* in specific circumstances, viz. a denial of *ātman* ‘focused on the lack of ‘self’ in the five aggregates’ (2009: 63).

⁶⁸ The idea lurking in the background is then, I suppose, that something that *is* suitable to be regarded as one’s *ātman* is eternal and unchanging – Bhattacharya capitalises on this possibility to argue that the *ātman-Brahman* of Advaita thus fulfils the requirement to be considered as one’s true *ātman*.

There is at least one *sutta* that can be read as a denial of the notion of an *ātman-Brahman*, however. Take the following extracts from *Majjhima Nikāya* 49 (*Brahmanimantanika Sutta*):⁶⁹

The Blessed One said: "On one occasion recently I was staying in Ukkattha in the Subhaga forest at the root of a royal sala tree. Now on that occasion an evil [pernicious] viewpoint⁷⁰ had arisen to Baka-Brahma: 'This is constant. This is permanent. This is eternal. This is total. This is not subject to falling away — for this does not take birth, does not age, does not die, does not fall away, does not reappear. And there is no other, higher escape.'

The Buddha continues:

"When this was said, Baka Brahma told me, 'But, good sir, what is actually constant I call "constant." What is actually permanent I call "permanent." What is actually eternal I call "eternal." What is actually total I call "total." What is actually not subject to falling away I call "not subject to falling away." Where one does not take birth, age, die, fall away, or reappear, I say, "For this does not take birth, does not age, does not die, does not fall away, does not reappear." And there being no other, higher escape, I say, "There is no other, higher escape."

Some unpacking is required here. First, we see the Buddha outline the 'pernicious viewpoint' held by Baka-Brahmā, a powerful deity that believes that he has seen the universe how it really is. It is important to note that Baka-Brahmā does not seem to be accounting for an empirical world in purely physical terms. He is, in fact, referring to the 'world' (read: cosmos) as instantiated in and by himself as heavenly king, on both a material and psychological level. Baka-

⁶⁹ For the sake of convenience, I here use Thanissaro Bhikkhu's (2007) translation of this *sutta* from the Pāli.

⁷⁰ I prefer 'pernicious viewpoint' to 'evil viewpoint' because it adequately communicates that the viewpoint has damaging consequences for those that hold it without passing any undue moral judgement. I think calling such a viewpoint 'evil' is rather to overstate the case. One can hold a mistaken, damaging viewpoint without it being 'evil', after all!

Brahmā is effectively claiming that he and/or the world that he inhabits is the eternal true reality. This is explained by Ajahn Brahm (2006) a couple of minutes into his audio commentary to the *sutta*, when he details that Baka-Brahmā thinks of himself as a creator of an eternal, unchanging (and so ultimate) reality.⁷¹

There is a very significant line contained in the above extract; namely where Baka-Brahmā talks about '[w]here one does not take birth, age, die, fall away, or reappear'. A realm or entity where one is not born, does not age, does not die, fall away or suffer rebirth: this sounds suspiciously like the *Brahman* as discussed in the *Upaniṣads* and as later expounded in the *ātman-Brahman* doctrine of the Advaitins. I think that the presence of these few words is evidence enough of the targets that the Buddha had in mind: Brahmins. Consequently, I think that a case can be made that this *sutta* provides early evidence of a Buddhist rejection of the *ātman-Brahman*, a case that is significant in terms of Bhattacharya's argument because it is found in the Pāli literature traditionally ascribed to the Buddha. As we have seen, Bhattacharya claims that the Buddha did not ever explicitly comment on the *ātman-Brahman*. Perhaps this is an allegorical comment on precisely that.

Nevertheless, Baka-Brahmā's most crucial claim is that liberation cannot be found outside of the definition of the world that he has offered, that there is nothing higher than his account of the totality of existence. This is a claim that would be advanced at a later time by Śaṅkara, and is emphatically advanced by Bhattacharya when he writes that '[o]ne who has realized the *ātman*

⁷¹ Thanissaro Bhikkhu (2007: note 1) also writes in a footnote that 'Baka Brahma here appears to be referring both to his Brahma world and to the state of mind that enables one to inhabit his Brahma world.'

is not outside the world, but he looks upon the world with new eyes' (2015: 13). Bhattacharya is making Baka-Brahmā's point for him – liberation consists in looking upon the permanent, the eternal with 'new eyes'. Liberation is to be realised in this world, but also in and as a *specific vision of this world*: in Advaitin terms, in a world supported by the *ātman-Brahman*. I contend that Baka-Brahmā's words here place him in such a world, and more, they show that he is actively advancing this thesis. Baka-Brahmā's arrogance and certainty lead him to dismiss the Buddha as just another mediocre ascetic, doomed to spend life under the influence and command of Baka-Brahmā.⁷² However, the Buddha quickly establishes himself as fully awakened and thus not simply equal to, but actually superior to Baka-Brahmā as regards knowledge of liberation. The Buddha informs Baka-Brahmā that he is ignorant of some spheres of existence outside of his own realm – a consequence of having spent too long dwelling in one place, an instance of *avidyā* made manifest by Baka-Brahmā's reluctance to think beyond himself. Such realms are not physical realms, they are *deva* realms and are thus made by mental activity (*manomaya*), which need not necessarily imply anything ontologically, viz. that they enjoy some substantial existence.⁷³ Such

⁷² From the *Brahmanimantika Sutta* translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu (2007):

'There were, monk, before your time, brahmins & contemplatives in the world whose ascetic practice lasted as long as your entire life span. They knew, when there was another, higher escape, that there was another, higher escape; or, when there was no other, higher escape, that there was no other, higher escape. So I tell you, monk, both that you will not find another, higher escape, and that, to that extent, you will reap your share of trouble & weariness. Monk, if you relish earth, you will lie close to me, lie within my domain, for me to banish and to do with as I like. If you relish liquid ... fire ... wind ... beings ... devas ... Pajapati ... brahma, you will lie close to me, lie within my domain, for me to banish and to do with as I like.'

⁷³ Jayarava Attwood (2014) writes convincingly both on why the favoured interpretation ought to be 'made by mental activity' as opposed to something like 'made of mind' (implying that 'mind' is some sort of substance from

realms are, then, *meditative* realms, made by mental activity (they are attained via what are called *jhānas* in Pāli (Skt.: *dhyānas*) – meditative states). The implication is that the Buddha has a more powerful mind, more thoroughgoing insight than Baka-Brahmā. Despite Baka-Brahmā's protestations, it becomes evident that the Buddha *knows more* than Baka-Brahmā, and so is his superior:

There is, brahma, the body named Subhakinha (Beautiful Black/Refulgent Glory) ... the body named Vehapphala (Sky-fruit/Great Fruit), {the body named Abhibhu (Conqueror)} which you don't know, don't see, but that I know, I see. Thus I am not your

which things can be built), and also on why we ought not to take such discussions to be an assertion of substantial existence. This position is not shared by scholars such as Donald Swearer (1973: 448), who instead opines that

the ethical and the ontic are definitely related in term mind, that is, the mind appears as the center point. It has, as it were, the power to create the "self." The ethical dimension stems from this fact. If the mind is ignorant and impure, one will suffer; if, on the other hand, the mind is enlightened and pure, one will attain happiness.

It is not immediately clear, however, that a construction of 'self' does indeed carry any serious ontological weight. We can say that the mind can (and does) 'create' narratives – even if these narratives are ultimately false – and yet it is a jump to assert any ontological significance to this creation of mind. Such creations do not appear to necessitate any substantial existence at all. Instead, we simply have a concept entertained in mind under which no real entity falls. In the same way that a deranged person might think that they are able to float through the air, a deluded person thinks they have (or are) an *ātman*. Both are mistaken designations, false attributions. Indeed, the entire Buddhist project rests on the rejection of *ātman*! It strikes me that Swearer's view runs closely to that of the ancient *pudgalavādins* – Buddhists that accepted the substantial reality of a 'person' or form of 'self'. His reasons for his train of thought are, he says, from the *Dhammapada*. He cites it thus (1973: 448):

Mind is the forerunner of (all evil) states. Mind is chief; mind-made are
If one speaks or acts with wicked mind, because of that, suffering follows
even as the wheel follows the hoof of the draught-ox.

Mind is the forerunner of (all good) states. Mind is chief; mind-made are
they. If one speaks or acts with pure mind, because of that, happiness follows
one, even as one's shadow that never leaves.

It is easy enough to see from where Swearer draws his conclusions. Good states are 'mind made', and acting with 'pure mind' brings about these good states. Is the claim here *really* that our mind changes the makeup of the world, or is it instead that our mindset changes how we engage with the world? In light of my argumentation throughout this work, I am more inclined to think that the latter applies.

mere equal in terms of direct knowing, so how could I be your inferior? I am actually superior to you.

Having directly known earth as earth, and having directly known the extent of what has not been experienced through the earthness of earth, I wasn't earth, I wasn't in earth, I wasn't coming from earth, I wasn't "Earth is mine." I didn't affirm earth. Thus I am not your mere equal in terms of direct knowing, so how could I be inferior? I am actually superior to you.

Again, there are a few things to unpack here. First, the Buddha lists the 'bodies' that are experienced via the *jhānas*: a *jhāna* being, of course, a meditative state and thus implying no ontological substance. The premise here is, as I have said, simply that the Buddha knows more than Baka-Brahmā, a supposed great, powerful deity. The Buddha is illustrating that despite Baka-Brahmā's claims to the contrary, there *is* some release or liberation different from and outside of – higher than – this Brahmā realm (the *ātman-Brahman?*). Such release is to be found via meditative insight, and it is outside of this realm not insofar as it is an existent place to which we can go, but rather in that it is a meditative state beyond Baka-Brahmā's comprehension or ability. In virtue of being existent as meditative states beyond Baka-Brahmā's comprehension, such realms are 'higher' than the account of existence offered by Baka-Brahmā. This in turn means that there is at least the possibility of some 'higher escape' provided that sufficient insight is developed. Swearer (1973: 447) writes that '[t]hrough attaining the four *jhānas* the consciousness or mind (*citta*) is made pure (*parisuddha*), freed from blemish, devoid of evil (*kilesa*), stable and immovable. The *citta* is thereby freed to direct itself toward the "insight that comes from knowledge."' In other words, the mind is directed not onto worldly concerns or reifications, but onto and into itself to develop an insight not to be found in worldly reifications. If I am right in linking the cosmic world occupied by Baka-Brahmā to the *Brahman*, then it strikes

me that the Buddha's insight cannot be related to some sort of cosmic self (because he has denied all that Baka-Brahmā has asserted of it). Nor can it be related to the individual *ātman*, which even Bhattacharya acknowledges was denied by the Buddha. Maybe it is the case, then, that the higher insight alluded to by the Buddha is actually *anātman*, tying in with the Buddha's denial that what I take to be a metaphor for the *Brahman* is permanent:

"When this was said, I told Baka Brahma, 'How immersed in ignorance is Baka Brahma! How immersed in ignorance is Baka Brahma! — in that what is actually inconstant he calls "constant." What is actually impermanent he calls "permanent." What is actually non-eternal he calls "eternal." What is actually partial he calls "total." What is actually subject to falling away he calls "not subject to falling away." Where one takes birth, ages, dies, falls away, and reappears, he says, "For here one does not take birth, does not age, does not die, does not fall away, does not reappear." And there being another, higher escape, he says, "There is no other, higher escape.'"

Even the great creator deity Baka-Brahmā is so tied up in his own sense of self (and self-importance!) that he has effectively led himself to delusion and ignorance regarding the world. There are mental realms potentially open to him that he is ignorant of and that he lacks the discipline or insight to access. There is thus a 'higher escape', but he is too self-absorbed to recognise it. There is no permanence to be found in that which he asserts to be the basis of reality, nor is there any refuge to be found in the reality in which Baka-Brahmā claims does not age, die, 'fall away' and so on. He dwells in this reality as the *jīva* might be said to dwell within the universal *ātman-Brahman*, that is to say labouring under delusion. Far from being liberated by his knowledge of and living within what he assumes to be the totality of existence, Baka-Brahmā has in fact contributed to his own trapping in *duḥkha* by attributing to his reality all of the things that it *is not*!

If this *sutta* is *not* intended to have parallels with the Vedic conception of *Brahman*, I would be very surprised indeed. Should my interpretation hold some water, then this is an early example of the Buddhist rejection of a cosmic *Brahman*: the Buddha rebukes Baka-Brahmā for his assertion that his realm (which I understand to be analogous to the ‘realm’ of *Brahman*) is permanent, the highest, and the full totality of existence. The most telling aspect here is that the Buddha does not make explicit reference to an *ātman-Brahman* type realm that is superior to that realm of Baka-Brahmā. He instead talks of imposing permanence and so on to what is not permanent, and by extension must refute the idea that the mindset required to ‘enter’ Baka-Brahmā’s realm is the highest mindset that one might achieve. This is, I contend, not because the Buddha believes that there exists some *ātman-Brahman* that accounts for the totality of existence, but because the Buddha believes the converse. I point briefly to an extract from the *Mūlapariyāya Sutta* as translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu (1998):

He directly knows Unbinding as Unbinding. Directly knowing Unbinding as Unbinding, he does not conceive things about Unbinding, does not conceive things in Unbinding, does not conceive things coming out of Unbinding, does not conceive Unbinding as 'mine,' does not delight in Unbinding. Why is that? Because the Tathagata has comprehended it to the end, I tell you.

‘Unbinding’ can here be understood as ‘*nirvāṇa*’ and so ‘liberation’: the Buddha denies that anything at all comes from the liberated state. This is interesting because for Bhattacharya as an Advaitin, ‘liberation’ comes in knowing the *ātman-Brahman*, and that same *ātman-Brahman* is, as we have seen, both the material and efficient cause of the universe. In other words, things appear to ‘come out of’ the *ātman-Brahman* (despite this appearance being ultimately false), and the *ātman-Brahman* is immanent in all things as their essential reality. The

Buddha here appears to reject the idea that being is tied up in or owes its existence to some other cosmic being. Although the *sutta* in question is strictly an argument against Sāṃkhya philosophy, the general thrust can be deployed against Advaita. Thanissaro Bhikkhu (1998) writes that

there has long been — and still is — a common tendency to create a "Buddhist" metaphysics in which the experience of emptiness, the Unconditioned, the Dharma-body, Buddha-nature, rigpa, etc., is said to function as the ground of being from which the "All" — the entirety of our sensory & mental experience — is said to spring and to which we return when we meditate.

This does indeed seem to sum up Bhattacharya's project! In equating *śūnyatā* with the 'ground of being from which the All. . . is said to spring',⁷⁴ Bhattacharya, Murti et al are building a Buddhist metaphysics, one that leads to the *ātman-Brahman*. Thanissaro Bhikkhu (1998) signs off his commentary by simply noting that '[a]ny teaching that follows these lines would be subject to the same criticism that the Buddha directed against the monks who first heard this discourse.' This is simply to say that any attempts at reification of experience into some sort of cosmic self are at odds with the positions defended by the Buddha in the above extracts. I think that we can reasonably read into the above an early rejection of *Brahman* and so a preliminary rejection of the thesis that the Buddha actually endorsed the *ātman-Brahman*. If my readings are a fair reflection of the content, then we have two early examples of the Buddhist aversion to absolutism in *any* sense, not just in the narrow sense of the *jīva*: to equate the Buddhist liberation with that of the Advaitins is to further impose ideas onto reality. Even if we want to say that

⁷⁴ The 'All' simply being the totality of experience and experienced phenomena.

these ideas are true only conventionally (and thus not true in an ultimate sense), there remains one idea of an ultimate ground of being. Such an idea should, on the accounts given above, be absent from any Buddhist understanding of the world.

§3: The *Ātman-Brahman*

In order to assess whether or not the Upaniṣadic *ātman-Brahman* is compatible with Buddhist thought, we need first to situate it, in general terms, in its ‘natural’ place. For his part, Bhattacharya provides a plethora of citations relating to what the Absolute *ātman-Brahman* is from his Śāṅkaran perspective, though continually acknowledging that no positive statement can ultimately be predicated of it. As it forms the entirety of Bhattacharya’s argument, I will first focus on the *ātman* within Advaitic interpretations of the *Upaniṣads*.⁷⁵ From there, I will examine how knowledge of the *ātman-Brahman* – and knowledge of the ultimate more generally – might work. From Bhattacharya’s perspective, then, the *ātman-Brahman* is

...not the chariot (*ratha*), but the “master of the chariot” (*rathin*),⁷⁶ its “inciter” (*pracodayitr*). Even though it moves in all bodies (*pratiśārīreṣu carati*), it “rests in its own greatness” (*sve mahimni tiṣṭhati*), above phenomena (*uparistha*), not subject to their contact “like a drop of water on a lotus petal” (*bindur iva puṣkare*). It is eternally pure (*śuddha*), peaceful (*śānta*), without individuality (*nirātman*)..., “empty” (*śūnya*). It is what makes us act (*kārayitr*), but does not act itself (*akartr*). Being “in-itself” (*svastha*), it is “as a spectator” (*prekṣakavat*) of our acts, good and bad, which do not affect it at all (*sitāsitaīḥ karmaphalair anabhibhūtaḥ*).

(Bhattacharya, 2015: 29)

⁷⁵ It is obvious to any reader that Bhattacharya favours the Śāṅkaran rendering of Vedānta over and above that of other Vedāntin schools, and consequently, he tends to rely upon the Śāṅkaran rendering of the *Upaniṣads*, too.

⁷⁶ The point here is that whilst the body is the chariot, the *ātman* sits beyond even the intellect, which is the charioteer piloting the chariot, and the mind, which is the reins. The *ātman* is thus the ‘master’ or ‘lord’ of the chariot but does not – in theory – have a direct hand in the control of the chariot.

Considering that the *ātman-Brahman* is beyond both conceptual thought and linguistic designation, both Bhattacharya and the *Upaniṣads* that he quotes certainly have a lot to say about it! Nevertheless, his descriptions do appear to accord with how the *ātman-Brahman* is represented in the *Upaniṣads*, particularly in part III of the *Aitareya Upaniṣad*. There is some incongruence, however, between the ‘spectator’ that is ‘without individuality’ and the notion that, as Bhattacharya claims, the *ātman-Brahman* is the lord of the chariot but simultaneously is a step removed from action. In fact, Bhattacharya claims that the *ātman* is ‘what makes us act (*kārayitr*), but does not act itself (*akartṛ*)’ (2015: 29). In the case of the chariot as described in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, then, the *ātman* is present, and makes the charioteer – the intellect – act, but it does this without acting itself. Precisely how a lord might impel his charioteer to act without first acting himself is, it seems to me, something of a mystery. Perhaps the comparison is simply a poor one. Even if the *ātman* simply bestows a propensity upon the intellect to act in a certain way, I think that we would have to concede that this is a causal action, albeit in a relatively weak sense.

Such examples also presuppose a duality between the acting agent (the charioteer) and the lord that causes the agent to act (the *ātman-Brahman*). According to Advaitin doctrine, in ultimate terms this duality simply cannot stand. The example is, then, necessarily flawed and paradoxical, though the Advaitin would argue that this is because we do not have access to the Olympian point of view that we occupy subsequent to the enjoyment of the knowledge of the *ātman-Brahman*. Anything we say about the *ātman-Brahman* is problematic because its reality transcends all that can be said of it. We cannot capture it in words; we can only offer unsatisfactory approximations. This notion is, of course, not new to anybody that is familiar with

apophaticism and mysticism more generally. We saw in §1 that this type of thought dominates religious mysticism of every kind. It can be claimed then that, assuming the Śāṅkaran interpretation of the *Upaniṣads* is correct, there is no real problem with our being unable to accurately account for the *ātman-Brahman* through language: ultimately, language is irrelevant to the experience, and it is after all the experience that is important. This is relatively controversial.⁷⁷

Another compounding factor arises later in the same *Upaniṣad* when it is claimed that this same *ātman* is ‘beyond time, space, and causality, eternal, Immutable’ (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* I:3:15). We might question how anything can be attributed to the *ātman* if it is beyond causality and beyond linguistic attributions, much less how we can thank it for the creation of the cosmos! This of course is the point for the Advaitin: we cannot *really* say anything about the *Brahman*. It is ultimately beyond all linguistic designations, all worldly attributes, and all characterisation. It seems unsatisfying to claim that conventionally, we can talk about the *ātman-Brahman* in such terms, but then say that ultimately they do not apply. Nevertheless, this sort of tension is common throughout the *Upaniṣads*. It is a point that we will revisit repeatedly as we progress through this work.

⁷⁷ David Burton (2001: 64) rails against this sort of understanding of mystical experiences, writing that it seems to him to be incoherent to claim ‘knowledge’ of something that is inexpressible or non-conceptual. He argues that if there truly were non-conceptual experiences (during which one cannot discriminate or discern), then they should be contentless. The upshot of their being contentless would be that the mystic should not be able to claim that they recall the experience whatsoever, let alone have ‘knowledge’ of it. That mystics (including Śāṅkara) *do* claim to have a knowledge of and recalled experience of such mystical episodes suggests, claims Burton, that the experience itself involved some degree of discrimination and thus some sort of conceptualisation.

The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* continues:

*yad idaṃ kiñca jagat sarvaṃ prāṇa ejati niḥsṛtam /
mahad bhayaṃ vajram udyataṃ ya etad vidur amṛtās te bhavanti //2//*

All the universe emanates from *Brahman* [*prāṇa*; breath of life]
and moves [in *Brahman*] /
[That *Brahman*] causes great fear, like a poised thunderbolt. Those
that know this [*Brahman*] become immortal //2//

(*Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, II:3:2)

Again, we see here that the *ātman-Brahman* is assigned some causal power. The universe could not emanate from the *Brahman*'s 'breath of life' if there were no means by which the *ātman-Brahman* could exercise this power of creation. Of course, we must take into account the use of figurative language to explain these apparent incongruities. Personification of the Absolute and the assignation of attributes and abilities to it is something that we encounter in religious texts of all descriptions. Bhattacharya would likely argue that this does not detract from the overarching message that *ultimately*, the *ātman-Brahman* is impersonal, *ultimately*, the *ātman-Brahman* is inactive, and *ultimately*, the *ātman-Brahman* is beyond categorisation: the language referring to the *ātman-Brahman* is then simply a conventional designation; a storytelling tool designed to make focused introspection seem attractive and worthwhile.

All that the assignation of positive attributes and personification really serve to do, then, is remind practitioners of the splendour of their religious path and provide a sort of figurehead to which they may relate. Such devices are specifically designed to illustrate why meditating to discover the *ātman-Brahman* is worth the effort. Indeed, Albahari is at pains to explain that attaching such (other) worldly qualities to something that is *ultimately* beyond such designations

is, in fact, an exercise designed to ‘function pragmatically to orient the mind towards the Real, by “affirming essential qualities that are really only denials of their opposites”’ (2002: 9). Albahari’s suggestion finds endorsement from both Anantanand Rambachan when he writes that ‘[t]he translation of *ānanda* as “bliss” is useful for emphasizing the desirability of *brahman* and the celebrative and joyful meaning of liberation’ (Rambachan, 2006: 21), and by Bhattacharya when he equates the empirical (in distinction to the transcendent) pursuit of *Brahman* as the attempt to attain a ‘vision of Plenitude’ that ‘is called *ānanda* “Bliss”’ (2015: 10).⁷⁸

One might also ask why Śaṅkara – having realised that the *ātman-Brahman* is ultimately beyond attribution and transcendent of all notions of deity – still deigned to build temples to popular deities (as well as compose hymns to these same deities) and advocate the worship of a personal God.⁷⁹ Unsurprisingly, says Biderman, the primary reason for Śaṅkara’s even referring to a ‘God’ or ‘Lord’ (*Īśvara*) in this sense is to see God as directly relating to the world ‘both as the first cause of the world and as an object of devotion’ (1982: 246). If the *ātman-Brahman* (*nirguṇa Brahman*) is transcendent and ultimately ineffable, then by contrast, Śaṅkara’s conception of *Īśvara* is – as Deutsch remarks – ‘that about which something can be said’ (Deutsch, 1969: 12). What is the significance of this? We have noted that on the surface of things, there

⁷⁸ Rambachan, it should be noted, explicitly acknowledges that the *ātman-Brahman* cannot actually be characterised as ‘bliss’ because this contradicts the fundamental *Upaniṣadic* teaching that the *ātman-Brahman* is ‘timeless and present in all states and mental conditions’ (2006: 21). He suggests equating the term *ānanda* with ‘limitlessness’ and reading it as a description of the nature of *ātman* rather than a description of an attribute. Of course, one might wonder whether a description of a nature is not simply a description of an attribute (or a set of attributes) and so be tempted to dismiss this semantic wrangling as little more than wordplay.

⁷⁹ As Biderman helpfully notes, Śaṅkara’s repeated contrasting of *Īśvara* (*saguṇa brahman*: *Brahman* with qualities) with *nirguṇa brahman* (*Brahman* without qualities) ensures a notion of a personal ‘God’ persists – to a point, at least – even in nondual Advaita (1982: 426).

appears to be some sort of tension between the idea – that Bhattacharya, following Śaṅkara, endorses – that the *ātman-Brahman* (or *nirguṇa brahman*) is ultimately beyond all attribution and conception, and the codification of a path to liberation that hinges on the very thing about which nothing can be spoken. This is of little practical help when discussing what liberation is and why one should opt to pursue it (often through great difficulty!). What Albahari, Rambachan, Biderman and Deutsch have in common, then, is the idea that Śaṅkara recognises that we need to know some sort of lower truth before we can begin to realise a higher one, and, in fact, such a contention also forms the backdrop to much of Bhattacharya's own thesis. Swami Nikhilānanda writes in his translation of Śaṅkara's *Ātmabodha* that the reasons for Śaṅkara's referring to a personal God, writing hymns to popular deities, and building temples that encourage deity worship can be readily explained. For Nikhilānanda as for Albahari et al., there is no contradiction in Śaṅkara's extolling the virtues of these personal deities and still *ultimately* holding that the *ātman-Brahman* is nondual, absolute and ineffable. On this, he writes that

The devotee catches a glimpse of the Absolute through the form of the Personal God, who is the highest manifestation of the Infinite that a finite mind can comprehend on the relative plane. Śaṅkara reiterates this principle in his philosophy. The beginner learns the art of concentration through worship of the Personal God (saguṇa Brahman) and acquires purity of heart through performance of unselfish duties. Endowed then with concentration and purity, he sets himself to the task of acquiring Knowledge of Brahman and realises, in the end, the Impersonal Absolute.

(Nikhilānanda, 1962: xv)

Śaṅkara (and, for the Advaitin, the *Upaniṣads*) are consequently following a method familiar to their Buddhist opponents. That is to say that they are pointing to the Ultimate/Absolute without *actually* speaking directly of it: it is, at its core, simply a negative

method. To do otherwise would be speaking of what is, in effect, unspeakable. It is precisely because the *ātman-Brahman* is so difficult to know that Śāṅkara is tailoring his teachings to the level of attainment that each practitioner occupies, opting to reveal Truth by the gradual disclosure of lesser truths. That *Īśvara* is connected to the world and can be recognised as such is significant, for it can then provide the necessary foothold for the practitioner to begin to ascend the transcendental heights that result in realisation of the *ātman-Brahman*. Even though *Īśvara* itself is not the highest realisation per se, it is the highest realisation available on the ‘relative plane’ or conventional level. The idea is then that once a practitioner has sufficiently developed their mind through devotion to *brahman* with qualities, they will be better furnished to realise the *brahman* without qualities.⁸⁰ This journey takes place via a mental process summed up by the Sanskrit word *bādhā*, usually translated as ‘contradiction’, but which is frequently translated in Advaitin contexts as ‘cancellation’ or ‘sublation’.⁸¹

What is sublation and what role does it play? Deutsch explains that it is ‘the mental process whereby one disvalues some previously appraised object or content of consciousness

⁸⁰ It should be mentioned that whilst Buddhism traditionally has little to say on the notion of a personal creator god, various Buddhist traditions do indeed make use of devas, deities and demons in their narratives (Vajrayāna Buddhism makes extensive use of deities as meditative tools, for example). *Devas* are, of course, subject to *karma* and so their existence in the heavens is of a finite timeframe. Further, the realms of existence in which these devas dwell are completely detached from that of our human existence, and so they generally cannot intervene in human physical or spiritual affairs. In Vajrayāna traditions, deities are generally not supposed to be thought as actually existent, but are rather representations of archetypes that are used to guide practice. Though undoubtedly interesting, this wide-ranging discussion is not directly relevant to my current project, and so I will not dwell too much on this particular facet of Buddhist tradition. It is enough to say that where deities do feature in Buddhist traditions, they generally are not used in the same way as the Abrahamic religions or indeed in the same way as the devotional Hindu schools.

⁸¹ Those referring back to Deutsch’s work will note that Deutsch himself prefers to reconstruct *bādhā* in his writings as ‘subration’ (Deutsch, 1969: 15). This is an idiosyncrasy of Deutsch’s work. I will stick with ‘sublation’ as there appears to be no discernible difference in meaning and so no meaningful reason for Deutsch’s choice.

because of its being contradicted by a new experience' (Deutsch, 1969: 15). To use the clichéd example oft cited in Advaitin texts as well as Buddhist, we might mistakenly take the coiled rope on the floor of a darkened room to be a coiled snake. In shock, we reach for a light, and it turns out that upon closer inspection, when illuminated by our light, this 'snake' happily turns out to be no more than a coiled rope. In this instance, we would say that our initial assessment of the object of consciousness (the rope) was confused or mistaken, and this mistaken assessment has since been *sublated* by the new information gleaned after we switched on the light (viz. that the snake is actually simply a rope!). It is, as Deutsch writes, 'a mental process through which one rectifies errors', but importantly, it also requires 'a turning away from, or rejection of, an object or content of consciousness as initially appraised in the light of a new judgement or experience which takes the place of the earlier judgement and to which "belief" is attached' (1969: 16). This means that in some circumstances (Deutsch gives the example of a mathematical concept which does not work in one situation but does for another), despite an error of judgement having been made, sublation does not occur. The significance of sublation for both Advaita and Buddhism is twofold.⁸² First, it accounts for the different levels of reality afforded to things and concepts within the respective philosophies, and second, it illustrates the means by which one can make spiritual progress. Let us examine why this is the case.

Ascription of 'different levels of reality' within the Advaita project is actually relatively straightforward: the more something is capable of being sublated, the less reality it has. The

⁸² The process of sublation is not, in fact, unique to Advaita; it is a necessary process for any system operating within the framework of the two truths. This means that sublation is as much a part of the Buddhist process as it is a part of the Advaitin process: the need to 'awaken' assumes the need to sublimate worldly experience!

distinction really hinges on what the Buddhists, predating Śāṅkara with their theory of two levels of truth (and so in some cases, reality), designated as conventional and ultimate truth, a distinction that, as many scholars – including Whaling (1979: 15) and Suthren Hirst (2005: 90) – recognise, very likely influenced Śāṅkara via the work of Gauḍapāda. Things that are experienced on the conventional level are capable of first, being mistaken, and second, being sublated once other information becomes known that contradicts this prior mistaken judgement or experience. Even more than this, experiences and judgements on the conventional level are not only *able* to be sublated, they are *necessarily* sublated. This is – as we have already seen – because for the Buddhists, Śāṅkara, and Bhattacharya, everything on the conventional level is but an imperfect approximation of the Truth of the ultimate level.⁸³ Owing to this inherent imperfection, everything experienced on the conventional level must be sublated in order for us to make spiritual progress. Put simply, as we begin to realise the *ātman-Brahman*, ultimate truth supersedes conventional truth: every conventional judgement or experience is necessarily replaced by experience of the ultimate; the *ātman-Brahman*. Suthren Hirst captures the process nicely when she writes that '[w]hen their true nature is realised, these [conventional experiences] all act as analogies for the process of sublation... one realises the provisional nature of the conventional world on "waking" to the ultimate truth' (2005: 92).

⁸³ There is a caveat here in relation to Indian Madhyamaka Buddhism (as opposed to its current-day Tibetan incarnation) which will be fully explained later. Put simply, it is not obvious that Nāgārjuna actually believed in two levels of existence or in a privileged ontology of any kind.

3.1 Knowing the *Ātman-Brahman*

There is a more elementary question behind all this talk of *Brahman*. How do we know that the *Brahman* exists prior to embarking upon this intense journey of reflective discovery? Swami Nikhilānanda asserts that the Vedāntins believe that '*Brahman* is neither a dogma of religion nor a private mystical experience, but a metaphysical truth based upon universal reason and experience' (1962: xvii). In other words, the *Brahman* exists whether we choose to believe it as a matter of religious adherence or not. More than that, its existence can be deduced 'based upon universal reason and experience', and so a religious bent of one flavour or another is presumably all but irrelevant when it comes to knowing that the *Brahman* exists! This conflicts, though, with Śaṅkara's commentary to *Brahmasūtra* 1.1.2, which deals with the definition(s) of *Brahman*. Despite the *ātman-Brahman* being beyond definition and conceptual thought, Śaṅkara still allows something to be said about it. Given first is the definition of *Brahman* as the 'cause of the world', which is the '*Taṭastha Lakṣaṇa*', or 'that characteristic of a thing which is distinct from its nature and yet serves to make it known' (Swami Vireswarananda, 2014: 21). Śaṅkara writes in his *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* 1.1.2:

That omniscient omnipotent cause from which proceeds the origin, subsistence, and dissolution of this world—which world is differentiated by names and forms, contains many agents and enjoyers, is the abode of the fruits of actions, these fruits having their definite places, times and causes, and the nature of whose arrangement cannot even be conceived by the mind,—that cause, we say, is Brahman.

(Śaṅkara, 2011: 16)

There is a subtlety to tease out here. It is problematic to say in a passage like this that the *Brahman* is the cause of the world and all within it whilst simultaneously holding that the

Brahman does not act. Bhattacharya, citing the *Maitri Upaniṣad* says of the *ātman-Brahman*; '[i]t is what makes us act (*kārayitr*), but it does not itself act (*akartṛ*)', and that it (the *Brahman*) is "'as a spectator" (*prekṣakavat*) of our acts, good and bad, which do not affect it at all (*sitāsitaiḥ karmaphalair anabhibhūtaḥ*)' (2015: 29). According to the Advaitin Swami Vireswarananda, this apparent causal attribute does not form any part of the *Brahman*'s nature, which is 'eternal and changeless' (Swami Vireswarananda, 2014: 21). Vireswarananda further writes that Śaṅkara also uses a scriptural definition to assert that 'Truth, Knowledge, Infinity is *Brahman*', and this definition he refers to as the '*Svarūpa Lakṣaṇa*', or 'that which defines *Brahman* in Its true essence' (2014: 21). How does any of this conflict with Swami Nikhilānanda's assertion that the *Brahman* can be known through 'universal reason'? Śaṅkara also maintains that the *Brahman* cannot be known via reason alone: 'Brahman is not an object of the senses, it has no connection with those other means of knowledge. For the senses have, according to their nature, only external things as their objects, not Brahman' (2011: 19). This means that if the *Brahman* cannot be known via the means of knowledge (*pramāṇas*), then it cannot strictly be reasoned toward. Instead, it must be *experienced*. To this end, reason is only useful insofar as it improves one's (conventional) understanding of *Brahman*: it can never *account for Brahman*. It would look as though Nikhilānanda's assertion that the *Brahman*'s existence can be known 'through universal reason' is, then, at odds with the position of Śaṅkara.

Whilst Śaṅkara obviously places a high value on the experience of the *Brahman*, it seems clear that for him, the *śruti* is the authoritative source of knowledge of the *Brahman*. To see this, we need only look at his *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* 1.1.2, where on the one hand he lauds the

significance of ‘intuition’ (*anubhava*) of the *Brahman* when paired with *śruti* revelation (2011: 18), yet later in the same text (2.1.6), asserts the following:

For Brahman, as being devoid of form and so on, cannot become an object of perception; and as there are in its case no characteristic marks (on which conclusions, &c. might be based), inference also and the other means of proof do not apply to it; but like religious duty, it is to be known solely on the ground of holy tradition.

(Śaṅkara 2011: 306-307)

Śaṅkara maintains, according to Swami Vireswarananda, that despite the veracity of the *pramāṇas* (means of knowledge) on a conventional level, ‘*Brahman* cannot be so established independently of the scriptures (*śruti*)’ very simply because ‘*Brahman* is not an object of the senses’ (2014: 21).⁸⁴ This is an assertion that we see borne out in the extracts given above.

⁸⁴ Buddhism – principally following the work of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti – allows two *pramāṇas*: perception (*pratyakṣa*) and inference (*anumāṇa*). There is also an emphasis on scripture, but this is largely viewed as a kind of derivative of perception and inference, and so there is a marked difference in the approach of Buddhist schools to that of the Advaitins. ‘*Śruti*’ literally translates as ‘what is heard’, but should be understood in the Advaitin context as something like ‘revelation’ (specifically, scripture that was ‘spoken to’ – revealed to – the *ṛṣis*). Thus, the key point to take away from Śaṅkara’s position is that when it comes to knowledge of the *Brahman*, scripture (*śabda*; *śruti*) is the authoritative *pramāṇa*.

For clarity, the six *pramāṇas* generally allowed in Advaita are *pratyakṣa* (perception); *anumāṇa* (inference); *śabda* (verbalisation of the testimony of the scriptures; verbalisation of *śruti*; the revealed word); *upamāṇa* (comparison/analogy); *arthāpatti* (postulation/presumption); *anupalabdhi* (non-recognition/non-perception)). There is some debate over whether or not Śaṅkara actually endorsed six *pramāṇas*, with some scholars claiming that Śaṅkara only ever endorsed three (Radhakrishnan, 1962: 488), and others, such as Sharma, acknowledging that there is reference to ‘at least five’ *pramāṇas* in Śaṅkara’s collected works (1992: 520).

Nevertheless, this is a significant point of departure from Buddhism and might serve to illustrate part of a decisive split not just between Advaita and Buddhism’s methods of teaching and liberation, but also in the principles grounding these very traditions, viz. how belief in an *ātman-Brahman* manifests in the first place.

Nikhilānanda and Śaṅkara agree, though, that *Brahman* can be experienced, or to put it in a way more palatable to the staunch Advaitin, *known*.⁸⁵ As we might expect, there is a caveat on Śaṅkara's part. *Brahma-Sūtra* 1.1.3, 'śāstrayonitvāt' (literally 'because scripture is the source'), proclaims that scripture is the source of self-knowledge (and so because 'self' is *brahman*, by extension, scripture is the source of knowledge of *brahman*) – as '*Brahman* has no form etc. and so cannot be cognised by direct perception' (Vireswarananda, 2014: 24). For Śaṅkara, the omniscience represented within the scriptures serve as a sort of signpost that should impel the practitioner to seek the origin of that omniscience, which consists not in the scripture, but in omniscience itself (Śaṅkara, 2011: 20). In other words, whilst the scripture manifests the omniscience and orients us towards it, the scripture is not itself *the source* of that omniscience.

There is an obvious implication here for both the nature of *Brahman* and the nature of knowledge: we have already seen that despite Nikhilānanda's assertion to the contrary, for the Advaitin, the *Brahman* cannot be discovered, found or known through reason alone. In this sense, we might borrow a phrase from Tillemans (1999: 29) and say that the *ātman-Brahman* is 'radically inaccessible' (Sanskrit: *atyantaparokṣa*). Indeed, it seems to me that this is a driving reason for Advaita's wide range of (arguably) six *pramāṇas* as opposed to the comparably austere two *pramāṇas* of Buddhism. *Śruti* and *śabda* necessarily occupy a primary position, for it is only via the scriptures themselves (*śruti*) and their verbalisation (by a *guru*/teacher; *śabda*) that the *ātman-Brahman* can be established at all. This is a fundamental reliance upon the authority of

⁸⁵Again, 'experienced' implies a subject-object relationship that the Advaitin would be at pains to point out cannot exist in a unified, undifferentiated Brahman. It is simply a case of knowing what one is rather than 'experiencing' something new or different.

scripture. Of course, reliance on scripture is – to differing degrees – also present in Buddhism, but the very simple fact is that, as Bhattacharya must concede, the Buddha does not ever claim in any surviving literature that his own method is established in virtue of the authority of revelation. The Buddha's path to liberation was established through experience, that is to say that the Buddha's awakening relied only on insight gained through meditation rather than on any scriptural direction. The Buddha does not claim that any Buddhist teaching is true simply because it is written, or because it has been said. Still, the Buddhist traditions that followed the Buddha have, to some degree, also relied upon 'scripture', at least once they finally got around to writing things down. It would be strange to claim that scripture (*āgama*) does not direct Buddhists when every Buddhist tradition bases its core beliefs on the Buddhist method as espoused *in* scriptures. Nevertheless, even this reliance is, as Tillemans observes, presented in a novel way. To this end, Tillemans writes that

[t]his tension between scripture and reason, which is a recurrent one amongst religious philosophers, was however approached in a novel way by the Buddhists, a way which allowed them to accept certain "propositions of faith" but nonetheless retain a rationalistic orientation and extreme parsimony with regard to acceptable means of knowledge.

(Tillemans, 1999: 27)

Interestingly, Dharmakīrti – despite his usual proclivity toward *vastubalapravṛtta* inferences – allows some recourse to scripture.⁸⁶ The means by which he justifies this step is in

⁸⁶ Tillemans (1999: 28-29) writes that an inference which functions according to *vastubalapravṛtta* functions 'objectively, or 'by the force of real entities', which is to say that such inferences 'should be evaluated purely on the basis of facts and states of affairs, and not in any way because of belief, acceptance or faith in someone or his words'. In terms of a transcendental *ātman-Brahman*, the implication is clear – a Buddhist is simply not justified to assert it in virtue of religious dogma; he needs to be able to see it, experience it, and point to it. An Advaitin, though, is, as we have seen, fully entitled to assert based on religious tradition and scriptural authority.

some ways analogous to the means by which Śaṅkara justifies his reliance on scripture for knowledge of the existence of the *ātman-Brahman*, and so is of relevance to the current discussion. Let us see how Dharmakīrti allows such recourse to scriptural authority. First, the ‘epistemological school’ to which Dignāga and Dharmakīrti are said to belong allows three types of objects: the perceptible (*pratyakṣa*), the imperceptible (*parokṣa*), and the ‘radically inaccessible’ (*atyantaparokṣa*). As Tillemans points out, the perceptible includes things with form (*rūpa*) – such as everyday objects – that are accessible to direct perception; the imperceptible includes things – impermanence, selflessness – that can be proven via the ‘usual *vastubala* kind of inference’. The radically inaccessible includes objects ‘such as the different heavens (*svarga*) or the details of the operation of the law of karma, which are, of course, inaccessible to direct perception’, and we might say that these things are then ‘beyond the limits of normal rationality’ (Tillemans, 1999: 29). Dharmakīrti intentionally restricts the import of scriptural authority to instances of the radically inaccessible, which means that he preserves the integrity of his arguments in favour of inferences being ‘objectively’ grounded more generally (in the case of *pratyakṣa* and *parokṣa*).

There are, however, some more limitations on the use of scripture. Tillemans points out that Tibetan scholars following Dharmakīrti detail a ‘threefold analysis’ which can ascertain when it is appropriate to deploy scriptural authority. The point of this analysis is to test whether or not scripture can be a sound basis for inferential reasoning. In order to be suitable, the relevant scriptural passage must be ‘(i) unrefuted by direct perception, (ii) unrefuted by *vastubalapravṛttānumāna*, and (iii) free from contradiction with other propositions whose truth is scripturally inferred’ (Tillemans, 1999: 30). Tillemans recognises an inductive argument here,

writing that ‘the scripture’s assertions concerning *pratyakṣa* and *parokṣa* are seen to be trustworthy, and so, similarly, its assertions about *atyantaparokṣa*, if not internally inconsistent, should also be judged trustworthy’ (1999: 30). How does this compare to the types of knowledge advanced by Śaṅkara? There is some crossover – both clearly allow some recourse to scripture to ‘prove’ some points, namely regarding the radically inaccessible. It seems that Dharmakīrti allows much less recourse, however. Śaṅkara reckons that scripture serves to orientate us towards the *ātman-Brahman* and that we could never know the *ātman-Brahman* if not for the written words of the divinely inspired *ṛṣis*.

To this end, the *Vedas* are self-sufficient and independent of other *pramāṇas*. As Śaṅkara writes in his *bhāṣya* to *Brahmasūtra* 2.1.1: ‘[t]he authoritativeness of the Veda with regard to the matters stated [viz. that there is ‘one universal self’: *ātman-Brahman*] by it is independent and direct, just as the light of the sun is the direct means of our knowledge of form and colour’ (Śaṅkara, 2011: 295). This is strikingly unambiguous. Just as our knowledge of colour and form is made possible by the light of the sun, it is the light of the scriptures that make possible knowledge of the *ātman-Brahman*. This, it seems to me, places a heavy emphasis on the role scripture to the detriment of the rest of the *pramāṇas* allowed by Śaṅkara. Like Dharmakīrti, though, Śaṅkara is quick to place some restrictions on the scope of scripture, most strikingly is his insistence that scriptural knowledge claims cannot be valid if they contradict another

pramāṇa.⁸⁷ This is identical to the restriction placed by Dharmakīrti! What, then, is the difference?

The short answer is that Śaṅkara appears to see scriptural authority as central: *śruti* as the most significant of the *pramāṇas*.⁸⁸ The reason for this is that it makes the *ātman-Brahman* known to us. Śaṅkara does not appear to foresee a situation in which scriptural inference would be inaccurate. Dharmakīrti does not share this view, going so far as to deny that scriptural inference is really a fully-fledged inference at all.⁸⁹ Tillemans illustrates the crux of the argument as follows. Whilst scriptural inference is preferable to guesswork or randomness, it is not a precise science and is not preferable *in toto*. This is partly because words have no necessary relation to the objects that they signify (1999: 42), and partly because given that scriptural inference is an instance of inductive reasoning, incorrect assumptions can be made and so incorrect conclusions drawn. This sort of inference relies upon probabilities, and so there is an

⁸⁷ Indeed, Śaṅkara writes the following in his *bhāṣya* to the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (trans. Mādhavānanda, 1950: 301-302):

Things in the world are known to possess certain fixed characteristics such as grossness or fineness. By citing them as examples the scriptures seek to tell us about some other thing which does not contradict them. They would not cite an example from life if they wanted to convey an idea of something contradictory to it. . . You cannot prove that fire is cold, or that the sun does not give heat, even by citing a hundred examples, for the facts would already be known to be otherwise through another means of knowledge. And one means of knowledge does not contradict another, for it only tells us about those things that cannot be known by any other means. Nor can the scriptures speak about an unknown thing without having recourse to conventional words and their meanings.

⁸⁸ When *śruti* refers to the revealed scriptures about which *śabda* is authoritative.

⁸⁹ Tillemans outlines the reasons why scriptural inference cannot be *certain* (whereas a normal inference ought to be) in significant detail (1999: 41-47).

inherent risk of error. Where scriptural inferences are used, it is, says Tillemans, always subject to a proviso. Thus, 'if we make the move of accepting a scripture's statements on radically inaccessible matters, it is because we are not, as far as we can judge, precluded from doing so, and because we want to or need to do so for our spiritual goals' (1999: 45). The Sanskrit cited by Tillemans is '*varam āgamat pravṛttāṁ evaṁ pravṛttir*', or 'if [one is] engaged with scripture, better engage [with scripture] like this'. The turn of phrase indicates, I think, that Dharmakīrti knew that scriptural inferences were uncertain (or at least carried a risk of uncertainty), but that we could perhaps minimise the risk of straying too far into prospective uncertainty. The way in which we might do this is by both analysing them according to the threefold analysis, and bearing in mind the pragmatic reasons that we have for using them in the first place.

The difference then is that for Śāṅkara, scripture is authoritative when it comes to determining the existence of and how to orientate oneself towards the *ātman-Brahman*. This is an important way in which the scripture is authoritative, especially when the related soteriology entirely hinges on knowing the *ātman-Brahman*. It is to effectively say that the only way one can reach liberation is to know the *ātman-Brahman*, and the only way in which one can know the *ātman-Brahman* is via the requisite scriptures (namely the *Upaniṣads*), presumably with some added help from Śāṅkara's commentaries on such epics as the *Gītā*. Dharmakīrti, on the other hand, does not place any such burden on the Buddhist scriptures, because its most central of claims (minus the operations of *karma*) are backed via *vastubala* inferences. Whereas Śāṅkara thinks that we need recourse to scripture to *know* the *ātman-Brahman*, Dharmakīrti thinks that we can know the truth of *anātman* more directly, through perception and inference. The main aspect of Advaita soteriology is, when it comes down to it, solely reliant on scriptural authority.

The main aspects of Buddhist soteriology are, in contrast, grounded in reason: the scope of scriptural authority for the Buddhist is much narrower.

This amounts to a real difference in how we gain important types of knowledge. For Advaita we know that knowledge of the *ātman-Brahman* is primary. This is directed by scripture alone, for we would not even know of the *ātman-Brahman's* existence were it not for the scriptures. For Dharmakīrti as a Buddhist, the proof of the pudding is really in the eating. We do not in principle *need* scripture to discover the Buddhist path; we could reason our way there regardless of scripture. With all this in mind, we might ask of what use is scripture for someone like Dharmakīrti? Dunne (2004: 243) translates this from *Pramāṇavārttika* 1.218cd:

Every judicious person who wishes to act analyses statements to determine what is and what is not scripture (*āgama*); he does so as one who wishes to act [effectively], and not because of some pernicious habit. Learning what should be put in practice from the scripture, he thinks, “Having acted accordingly, I might realise my goal.” On the basis of the trustworthiness of that scripture with regard to things that can be experienced [through perception or empirical inference], that person acts with regard to other things [i.e. the supersensible objects described in that scripture] because such is the case for most practical action in the world.⁹⁰

From this, it is obvious that for Dharmakīrti, scripture does have some instrumental value. It is to be measured with some caution, however, and only in relation to those aspects of the scripture which we can verify ourselves: if these aspects are verifiable through perception and inference, then we might provisionally trust in the more outlandish, supersensible aspects of the

⁹⁰ All annotations are Dunne's.

scripture. This is, as it turns out, very different indeed from the emphasis placed on scripture by the Advaitins.

3.2 Ultimate Knowledge

We have established that for Śaṅkara, the *ātman-Brahman* falls into the category of ‘radically inaccessible’ in the same way that the Absolute does for thinkers such as Pseudo-Dionysius and Maimonides; after all, we have already seen in the *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* the role of scripture in revealing the *ātman-Brahman*’s existence. It is here that Śaṅkara explicitly denies that the *ātman-Brahman* can be known in any way other than through the revelation catalogued in the scriptures.⁹¹ We must remind ourselves, though, that for Advaita, there are potentially six *pramāṇas* and not only two: we have seen how Śaṅkara allows one *pramāṇa* specifically in order to safeguard the validity of both scripture and the verbal communication of scripture, a move not permitted by Buddhists of any tradition.

Further, in his translation of Śaṅkara’s commentary to *Brahmasūtra* 1.1.4, Vireswarananda writes that

[t]he uniqueness of Brahman is quite apparent, as It cannot be realised either by direct perception or inference in the absence of form etc. and characteristics respectively. Reasoning also has been adopted by the scriptures here by citing the example of clay to elucidate their point. As different objects are made out of clay, so are all things created from this Brahman.

(Swami Vireswarananda, 2014: 26)

⁹¹ That is to say that we would not know of the *ātman-Brahman*’s existence – or even to bother looking for it – if it were not for the scriptures detailing as much. It is not something that can be discovered out in the world by some accident.

This passage is telling on two fronts. First, Vireswarananda specifically denies that knowledge of the *ātman-Brahman* is any sort of inference – a distinction that will prove relevant shortly.⁹² Second, we see an instantiation of another *pramāṇa*, analogy (*upamāṇa*), when Vireswarananda elaborates on the example of one lump of clay making many things. It is the scriptures that give this example (specifically *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6:1:2-6), but the *ātman-Brahman* discussed in these same scriptures is also supposed to be ultimately non-dual, inactive and so without attributes. It must be the case, then, that this example of action is given not as an *ultimate*, literal account of the *Brahman*, but rather as an analogy to allow the unenlightened practitioner to begin to gain knowledge of the *Brahman* on a conventional, basic level. The same applies to the *pramāṇa* of inference (*anumāṇa*): on an ultimate level, no inference gives insight to the nature of the *ātman-Brahman*, but on the conventional level that we occupy, some inferences serve to orientate the practitioner towards *Brahman*. How might this work? The most obvious instance is when Śaṅkara argues that it follows from the fact that there is a body of scripture ‘possessing the quality of omniscience’ that the *Brahman* ‘is the source, i.e. the cause of the great body of Scripture’ (2011: 20). He further states that ‘Scripture consisting of the *Rig-veda*, &c., as described above, is the source or cause, i.e. the means of right knowledge through which we understand the nature of Brahman’ (2011: 20), and goes on to write that it is via scripture alone that we come to know *Brahman* as the cause and origin of the world. How does scripture tell us this? Quite simply because *Brahman* inspired the scriptures! There are, of

⁹² I think it worth mentioning that ‘knowledge of’ here means something very specific, viz. knowledge of the essence of the *Brahman*. It refers to an intuitive mystical *gnosis*.

course, some inferences here. But the point is that such inferences are conventional and do not stand alone as Truths: the point of the scriptures talking in such lowly conventional terms – which are ultimately inapplicable to the *Brahman* – is to inspire action on the part of the reader. The scripture should spur the reader to introspection and meditation upon the *ātman*-*Brahman*. It is then through that action that one might come to know *Brahman* through intuitive experience.

It is still the case, however, that the *pramāṇas* are doing the work here. Though the *Brahman* is ultimately formless and without attributes, at least two *pramāṇas* are at play when we speak about ‘knowledge’ of it: first, scriptural authority, second, analogy (which builds on the ideas revealed through scripture). There might even be a third *pramāṇa* at play – *anubhava*: direct experience, intuition – though whether or not this strictly counts as a *pramāṇa* is somewhat controversial (Sharma, 1992).⁹³ However, there is a caveat. Insofar as the *pramāṇas* are useful to the Advaitin practitioner, they are only useful on this conventional level. It is here that we begin to see some strong parallels with the Madhyamaka of Nāgārjuna. Śaṅkara recognises that there is a tension between the ultimate existence of the *ātman*-*Brahman* and the process of directing people toward this ultimate existence using words (*śabda*, *śruti*). Like Nāgārjuna, Śaṅkara believes that there are two levels of truth and reality: conventional and

⁹³ Sharma argues that *anubhava* should be classed as a *pramāṇa*, but in a slightly different way than Śaṅkara would usually admit. By Sharma’s reading (1992: 522), this would involve classing *anubhava* as a ‘means of valid knowledge’ rather than a ‘valid means of knowledge’ (which is how a *pramāṇa* is usually defined). The difference is subtle but significant. Sharma writes that ‘Śaṅkara seems to equivocate, for *śruti* is a valid means of knowledge about *Brahman* in the *vyāvahārika* realm, and *anubhava* is a means of valid *pāramārthika* knowledge. In the case of *śruti* by itself, one ‘knows’ about *Brahman* because one cites the scriptures; in the case of *anubhava*, one cites the scriptures because one knows [*Brahman*]’ (1992: 522). The idea is that at the time *anubhava* is used as a *pramāṇa*, the need for *pramāṇas* passes: once one has direct perception of the *Brahman*, the need for language describing the knowledge (be it valid means of knowledge or means of valid knowledge) disappears.

ultimate. For Śāṅkara, *Brahman* is the ultimate truth/reality, and everything else is, in Bhattacharya's words, an imperfect approximation: '[a]ll truths as can be formulated are, in fact, but approximations of Truth, which is inexpressible; none of them can be identified with Truth itself' (2015: 9). This means that every account of reality that does not culminate in intuition/knowledge/experience of the *ātman-Brahman* is necessarily inferior. It is lacking in a fundamental way – it is *avidyā*.

Nāgārjuna thinks that in order for the *pramāṇas* to be established in the way that his Naiyāyika opponents assume they are, the *pramāṇas* must themselves be ultimate in nature. That is to say that the *pramāṇas* must establish their own existence, and as such, cannot be subject to causes, conditions or influences. According to such criteria, a *pramāṇa* must then possess a *svabhāva*. It is a matter of fact that Nāgārjuna has no time for *svabhāva*, and so it should come as no surprise that his starting position will be that a *pramāṇa* cannot exist with *svabhāva*. Viz., a *pramāṇa* cannot be self-caused/self-established.

Of course, if we accept *svabhāva*, then we have quite a different view. A proponent of *svabhāva* might well claim that we do, in fact, see intrinsic natures in the world's phenomena. Where Nāgārjuna sees a mistake, such a person might see insight into the true nature of reality (i.e. that everything exists with *svabhāva*). Accordingly, such an objector might want to argue that the *pramāṇas* are indeed self-established in virtue of their respective intrinsic natures.

Indeed, at *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (VV)⁹⁴ 8, Nāgārjuna offers one such objection to his arguments that all entities are empty of *svabhāva*:

*nairyāṇikasvabhāvo dharma nairyāṇikāśca ye teṣām /
dharmāvasthoktānāmevamanairyāṇikādīnām //8//*

And those things which are conducive to liberation [possess] intrinsic natures [which are] conducive to liberation /
Thus, [the same holds for] things spoken of [in relation to] the state of things [and for things that] are not conducive to liberation //8//

Nāgārjuna further details his opponent's stance in the commentary:

*iha ca dharmāvasthoktānām nairyāṇikānām dharmānām
nairyāṇikaḥ svabhāvaḥ anairyāṇikānāmanairyāṇikaḥ
(svabhāvaḥ)⁹⁵ bodhyaṅgikānām bodhyaṅgikaḥ
abodhyaṅgikānāmbodhyaṅgikaḥ bodhipakṣikānām
bodhipakṣikaḥ abodhipakṣikānāmbodhipakṣikaḥ / evamapi
śeṣānām / tadyasmādevamanekaprakāro dharmānām svabhāva
dṛṣṭastasmādyadyuktaṁ niḥsvabhāvāḥ sarvabhāvā
niḥsvabhāvatvāccūnyā iti tanna /*

Now, things mentioned in connection with the state of things, and things [that are] conducive to liberation, have an intrinsic nature [that is] conducive to liberation. [Things that are] not conducive to liberations [have an] intrinsic nature [that is] not conducive to liberation, the limbs of liberation [have an intrinsic nature that is] the limbs of liberation, [those that are] not the limbs of liberation [have an intrinsic nature that is] not the limbs of liberation. [The things that] belong to perfect wisdom (*bodhipakṣika*) [have an intrinsic nature that] belongs to perfect wisdom, [those things that] do not belong to perfect wisdom [have an intrinsic nature that] do not belong to perfect wisdom. Thus for the remaining

⁹⁴ Sanskrit text for the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* taken from Bhattacharya, Johnston, Kunst, *The Dialectical Method of Nāgārjuna: Vigrahavyāvartanī* (2002).

⁹⁵ This is added in the Tibetan translation once, and the Chinese translation after each item in the list, though it is apparently not present in the original Sanskrit (Bhattacharya, Johnston, Kunst, 2002: 49). The meaning remains largely the same whether *svabhāva* is added or not, with the first instance of *svabhāvaḥ* enough (strictly speaking) to establish that we are referring to the intrinsic natures of each consecutive item mentioned. I have added it here simply because I think it reads a little easier with the second '*svabhāvaḥ*' included.

[things]. Because in this way different kinds of intrinsic natures are seen, the statement 'all things lack intrinsic nature, [and because of this] lack of intrinsic nature [all things are] empty (*śūnya*)' is not valid (*tan na*).

The opponent is stating that because we can readily distinguish intrinsic natures, the Mādhyamika contention that all entities are empty of intrinsic natures cannot be established. This serves two purposes in relation to the *pramāṇas*. First, because the *pramāṇas* are obviously supposed to be conducive to liberation (insofar as they allow one to determine what is Real and disregard that which is not), *nairyāṇikasvabhāvo dharma nairyāṇikāśca ye teṣām* is simply a statement of fact: things that are useful to liberation have intrinsic natures that *make them* useful to liberation. Second, if the *pramāṇas* do indeed have an intrinsic nature, then they are established from their own side and so require no further metaphysical or epistemic justification. This means that by extension, the *pramāṇas* are ultimately existent. In fact, even if it were somehow the case that the *pramāṇas* were *not* conducive to liberation, the opponent holds that they would still have an intrinsic nature. In such a case, this nature would simply be one that is *not* conducive to liberation! It is obvious that the objector holds an essentialist view of the world – the existence of *svabhāva* is not in question for them, instead, the only question is around how each intrinsic nature is to be categorised (conductive/not conducive to liberation, etc.).

We might say that so far, this looks like less an argument from the opponent and more of an assertion. The reasons for their holding this position are not developed until VV9, where the opponent makes the familiar argument that without intrinsic natures grounding things in the world, the statement purporting to negate intrinsic natures could not possibly exist. The statement 'there are no intrinsic natures' requires that there be an existent referent, and for the

opponent, the only way such a referent could possibly exist is through possession of an intrinsic nature. Thus at VV 9 we read:

*yadi ca na bhavetsvabhāvo dharmānām niḥsvabhāva ityeva /
nāmāpi bhavennaivaṃ nāma hi nirvastukaṃ nāsti //9//*

If things [had] no intrinsic nature, even the name ‘no intrinsic nature’ [would] not exist /
For [there] is no name without [an] object [to which it refers] //9//

This is a simple reassertion of the view – common then as it is now – that there must be some grounding principle behind reality. Of course, we know that we do indeed have names for things that do not exist in reality: we would be hard pushed to find an existent banshee to which the name ‘banshee’ refers, for example. Nāgārjuna further extrapolates his opponent’s position in the commentary to VV 9, writing in the Sanskrit:

*yadi sarvadharmāṇām svabhāva na bhavettatrāpi niḥsvabhāva
bhavet / tatra niḥsvabhāva ityevaṃ nāmāpi na bhavet / kasmāt /
nāma hi nirvastukāṃ kiṃcidapi nāsti /
tasmānnāmasadbhāvātsvabhāvo bhāvānāmasti
svabhāvasadbhāvāccāśūnyāḥ sarvabhāvāḥ / tasmādyaduktaṃ
niḥsvabhāvāḥ sarvabhāvā niḥsvabhāvatvācchūnyā iti tanna /*

If all things [have] no intrinsic nature, there would be an absence of intrinsic nature. Then, even the name ‘absence of intrinsic nature’ [would] not exist. Why? Because a name without an object [to which it refers] does not exist. Thus, because [the] name exists, [so too does] intrinsic nature. Intrinsic nature being true (*sadbhāva*), all things are non-empty (*aśūnyāḥ sarvabhāvāḥ*). Therefore, the statement ‘all things lack intrinsic nature, [and because of this] lack of intrinsic nature [all things are] empty (*śūnya*)’ is not established (*tan na*).

The argument from the opponent is simple enough to grasp – we cannot say that an entity lacks *svabhāva* if we want to speak meaningfully about the world. Intrinsic nature is the grounding principle of all existent things, and without this grounding principle – intrinsic nature

– there is nothing to be negated. We can only make sense of the statement ‘there is no intrinsic nature’ if there is actually an intrinsic nature to deny - something can only be negated in virtue of its existence. The opponent’s view assumes that intrinsic nature exists and that it grounds *everything*. This means that every object, statement, entity etc. is grounded by its *svabhāva* (which by extension means that every entity has what we might loosely call a ‘self’).

It is not obvious, however, that Nāgārjuna need believe an intrinsic nature *actually* exists in order to dispute how it might theoretically work. Just as I need not believe that God exists in order to make sense of a conversation about the attributes of God with a theist, so too may Nāgārjuna discuss with an opponent principles and ideas that do not actually exist. As I have already said, I can talk of Harry Potter-style Dementors with my young cousins (sort of – I am far from an expert!), but I think it a stretch to say that either of us need accept their actual existence in the world. I can write a story about vampires without accepting their actual existence. Safe to say then, that negating the idea of intrinsic existence does not necessarily require that the negating statement be grounded in reality *by* an intrinsic nature. This is to in some ways place the cart before the horse – ideas do not *need* to exist as ‘real’ entities in order to be discussed: *pramāṇas* do not need to exist in order to be negated.

As mentioned earlier, a convenient way to think of this is as follows: it is not necessary for a unicorn or minotaur to exist independently in the world for me to deny their existence in the world. I cannot reasonably be accused of tacitly affirming the ultimate existence of both unicorns and minotaurs by writing that they are mythical creatures that do not exist. All that is really demonstrated is that I understand what both the idea of a unicorn involves (its status as a

horse with a horn growing from its head) and what the idea of the Minotaur involves (its status as a creature with the body of a man and the head of a bull) and so on. We can say that as long as we understand the *idea* or concept of something, it does not much matter if it exists independently of the mind. Being able to categorise ideas is what really matters, not whether there ever existed entities or objects falling under those ideas. This is, I hazard, Nāgārjuna's starting point. Whilst he understands what intrinsic nature entails conceptually, he thinks that he can still deny its existence (much as he denies the establishment of the *pramāṇas*) without the baggage of a tacit affirmation of the ultimate existence of intrinsic nature (or the *pramāṇas*). Such an affirmation would, after all, be an insidious trap that binds us to a view. As Huntington (2017: 18) so eloquently writes:

One thing is clear: Nāgārjuna's soteriological aim entails the cessation of all clinging to ideas (*vikalpa*), views (*dṛṣṭi*), assertions (*pakṣa*), and propositions (*pratijñā*), and the consequent immersion in a groundless state of non-abiding—what is referred to in the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā as the “extinction of conceptual diffusion in emptiness”.

The point of the objection is that the opponent thinks that all of reality must be reducible to some sort of ultimate basic. Obviously, the issue for the Mādhyamika is that this state of affairs is both deeply unattractive as well as untenable in practical terms. Nāgārjuna expends a great deal of effort in refuting the very notion of objects and ideas being ‘established’ (by which he means real, or ultimately existent rather than simply conventionally existent), and so even the *pramāṇas* by which thinkers such as Śaṅkara justify their knowledge of the *ātman-Brahman* cannot be ultimately existent. This is significant to us not simply in terms of the rejection of Advaitin epistemology, but also more broadly. Nāgārjuna clearly and consistently demonstrates

a deep-seated aversion to accepting any ‘ultimate’ entity, rejecting the possibility of *svabhāva* at every opportunity. This means that whilst Nāgārjuna does not offer one large, concerted argument specifically against the *ātman-Brahman*, the consistent application of his philosophy must necessarily preclude one from equating *śūnyatā* with the *ātman-Brahman*.

Let us then look at Nāgārjuna’s particular arguments against the establishment of *pramāṇas* as presented in the VV. To be clear, my aim here is not to refute or put forth a theory of knowledge per se. It is strictly to illustrate the far-reaching nature of Nāgārjuna’s staunch anti-essentialism and to illustrate the lengths to which he is prepared to go in order to refute any kind of permanence, reification, or theory-building. I hope that it is by now clear that these lengths are crucial in distinguishing Nāgārjuna’s version of Madhyamaka from Advaitin doctrine. The most important arguments for my purposes begin around VV 30, and so it is here that I will start. The verse on its own is relatively terse and difficult, and so I will quote both the verse and the commentary from VV 30-33 and extrapolate from there. It is worth bearing in mind, I think, that the majority of the arguments presented here are, though aimed primarily at the Naiyāyikas, effective toward anybody holding this sort of *pramāṇa* viewpoint: this includes other Buddhists. To reiterate, the issue is not with a *pramāṇa* viewpoint per se. It is with the essentialism that the viewpoint – especially when taken on any terms that resemble the Naiyāyika position – seems to entail.

VV 30 reads:

*yadi kiṃcidupalabheyaṃ pravartayeyaṃ nivartayeyaṃ vā /
pratyakṣādibhirarthaistadabhāvānme ‘nupālambhaḥ //30//*

*yadyahaṃ kiṃcidarthamupalabheyam*⁹⁶
pratyakṣānumānopamānāgamaiścaturbhiḥ pramāṇaiścaturṇām
vā pramāṇānāmanyatamena ata eva pravartayeyaṃ vā
nivartayeyaṃ vā / yathārthamevāhaṃ kaṃcinnopalabhe
tasmānna pravartayāmi na nirvartayāmi / tatraivaṃ sati yo
bhavatopālambha ukto yadi pratyakṣādīnām
pramāṇānāmanyatamenopalabhya bhāvānvivinivartayasi nanu tāni
pramāṇāni na santi taiśca pramāṇairapi gamyā arthā santīti sa me
bhavatyevānupālambhaḥ /

If I apprehended something [via means of] perception etc., then I would affirm or deny [something about the object apprehended] / [But since such] an object does not exist, I am not to blame //30//

If I apprehended some object [via the] four *pramāṇas*, by perception, inference, comparison, and authority (*āgamaiḥ*), or through one of these four *pramāṇas*, then I would affirm or deny. Since, in fact (*eva*), I do not ever perceive an object [via the *pramāṇas*], I neither affirm nor deny. In this context, your criticism is ‘Though you deny objects after having apprehended them by one of the *pramāṇas* [such as] perception, [you claim that] those *pramāṇas* do not exist and the objects apprehended by [those] *pramāṇas* do not exist.’ That does not concern me at all.

There is an anti-essentialist undercurrent throughout the verses cited that is worth considering in some more detail. First, to VV 30: here we see Nāgārjuna contend that he neither asserts nor denies anything about objects perceived via the *pramāṇas* precisely because there is no object in existence which is perceived via the *pramāṇas*. What this means is not that objects that are perceived do not exist (or at least appear to exist!), but rather that objects *cannot be perceived* by *pramāṇas*. This subtle difference is meant to highlight that perception does not

⁹⁶ The first member of this compound is given in the BJK version of the VV as *kaṃcid*. I follow the amendment by Rāhula Sāṅkṛtyāyana in substituting this by *kiṃcid* instead. There is no discernible change in meaning with this substitution, I simply think that it reads better; the particle *kaṃ* being principally Vedic in terms of origin and era of use (Whitney, 1879: 408).

occur via some things called *pramāṇas* – a controversial notion even in Buddhist circles! We will see that Nāgārjuna thinks that this is the case because he does not think that *pramāṇas* can be satisfactorily explained or established. Nāgārjuna goes on to write that any criticism based around the idea that he somehow utilises the *pramāṇas* to perceive objects which he then roundly denies simply ‘does not concern’ him – this is because it falls foul of an elementary misunderstanding and misrepresents his actual argument. But how can this be the case? The objector seems to be arguing that the *pramāṇas* are what we perceive the world through whether or not we believe that they exist. To them, the very fact that Nāgārjuna perceives at all means that he is utilising at least some *pramāṇas* – he might as well be sitting on a chair whilst claiming that the chair does not exist!

Of course, Nāgārjuna *would indeed* sit on a chair and claim that it does not exist, because when he uses the word ‘existent’ (*bhāva*), he generally means ‘ultimately existent’.⁹⁷ This is apparent throughout his various writings, but is perhaps most neatly summarised at *MMK* 15.4 where Nāgārjuna argues that ‘existence’ is a result of intrinsic or extrinsic natures.⁹⁸ For a thing

⁹⁷ Siderits and Katsura (2013: 158) note that Nāgārjuna might sometimes be employing wordplay when he uses *bhāva*; it can after all mean ‘existent’ or ‘nature’. Owing to such ambiguities inherent in Sanskrit, it is largely down to the interpreter to try to make sense of such quirks in style, relying on, above all, context. It is owing to the overall context of this chapter of the *MMK* that I feel comfortable in discerning that *bhāva* here stands for ‘existent’, which is then shorthand for ‘ultimate existent’ (viz. an existent with *svabhāva*).

⁹⁸ *MMK* 15.4:

*svabhāvaparabhāvābhyām ṛte bhāvaḥ kutaḥ punaḥ /
svabhāve parabhāve ca sati bhāvo hi sidhyati //4//*

Without intrinsic and extrinsic natures, whence [comes an] existent? /
[For an] existent is established on account of intrinsic or extrinsic nature.

to be ‘established’, it must be ‘ultimately established’ and so ultimately exist. In other words, it must have *svabhāva*. It is crucial to remember that for Nāgārjuna, to possess *svabhāva* is to be ultimately existent, immutable and permanent.⁹⁹ This is the central theme underpinning all of his work – *svabhāva* sabotages the soteriological project of Buddhism as its possession precludes change. It is for this reason that Nāgārjuna spends so much time railing against what he considers essentialist philosophical and religious positions – it is precisely because of their essentialism (viz. their endorsement of *svabhāva*) that they remove the means to liberation.¹⁰⁰ Nāgārjuna’s problem is not with perception – he knows very well that we perceive and experience. This is, in

Nāgārjuna elsewhere argues that neither intrinsic nor extrinsic natures are possible, for example at *MMK* 15.1-2 where Nāgārjuna argues that *svabhāva* cannot be produced by causes and conditions because it would then be a product and thus not intrinsic at all. This is unacceptable to even the Ābhidharmikas, for as Karunadasa writes, “[s]ince a *dharmā* and its intrinsic nature are the same (for the duality is only posited for purposes of explanation), to claim that its intrinsic nature undergoes modification is to deny its very existence’ (1996: 21). Nāgārjuna thinks that something that is a product *is* modified, namely by its causes and conditions. Consequently, a produced existent (something that exists with *svabhāva*) cannot exist.

⁹⁹ By the time of Nāgārjuna’s writing, this was, I think, the standard understanding of *svabhāva* across many traditions. It was not always this way, however. For more on the development of *svabhāva* and *dharmā* as ultimately existent entities, see Ronkin (2005). For more on the cognitive and ontological aspects of *svabhāva*, see Westerhoff (2007).

¹⁰⁰ The route to liberation is here hindered in two ways. First, if *svabhāva* exists (remember that it would necessarily be an ultimately existent thing), then this would be enough to physically halt any change at any place at any time. The idea is that a thing with *svabhāva* simply cannot be otherwise, and so it cannot stop being the way that it is. In terms of liberation and removal of defilements and the like, this would entail that every defilement exists the way it exists permanently, and so accounting for liberation becomes extremely problematic. The upshot would be that nobody could ever become liberated. Nāgārjuna does not accept this – the Buddha is proof that we can reach liberation! For Nāgārjuna, then, *svabhāva* cannot exist and must instead be a mistaken imputation forced onto objects by deluded minds. This is what forms the basis of every argument deployed by Nāgārjuna in both the *MMK* and the *VV*.

Second, the very *idea* of *svabhāva* halts progress along the soteriological journey. Why? Very simply because it is something to which practitioners cling. This also goes for Buddhist practitioners, who sometimes think that *śūnyatā* is the essential principle of everything, making it equivalent to *svabhāva* in all but name (indeed, Bhattacharya makes this very claim (2015:13)). Nāgārjuna wants to avoid this sort of conflation and remove *any* form of clinging: to do this is to reify that which is supposed to remove the habit of reification! There will be more to say on this a little later.

fact, a basic maxim of Buddhism.¹⁰¹ Rather, Nāgārjuna could be classified as what Mohanta calls a ‘cognitive sceptic’: elaborating on what this position entails, Mohanta (1997: 53) writes that

Cognitive scepticism may be taken thus for a philosophical attitude which suspends the possibility of making conclusive statements concerning valid cognition (*prāma*) for want of sufficiently warranted grounds or *pramāṇas*. A cognitive sceptic does not go for theory-making.

Nāgārjuna is concerned, then, with three things. First with casting doubt on the assumption that the *pramāṇas* establish the (ultimate) reality of their objects (*prameyas*), second with casting doubt on the assumption that the *pramāṇas* themselves are established as ‘real’ (in Nāgārjunian terms, ultimately real), and third, with avoiding advancing any theory of his own.¹⁰²

What is the misunderstanding that ‘does not concern’ Nāgārjuna? It is the idea that he perceives via the same *pramāṇas* that he argues are not established. In light of the above, this is simply not a problem for Nāgārjuna. He is not claiming that our experience of the world is false *per se*, nor is he claiming that there is no perception or even that we cannot make some sorts of claims about the world that are conventionally grounded in experience. Rather, the point is that *ultimately*, such claims are not grounded in anything. This is significant in terms of the current work, because it means that by extension, there is no ground. Put another way, there can be no

¹⁰¹ Insofar as Buddhism aims to analyse, reduce and then remove all experiences of dissatisfaction (*duḥkha*).

¹⁰² As Ayer (1956: 40) notes, ‘All that [the cognitive sceptic] requires, is that errors should be possible, not that they should actually occur. For his charge against our standards of proof is not that they work badly; he does not suggest that there are others which would work better. The ground on which he attacks them is that they are logically defective; or if not defective, at any rate logically questionable.’ The ‘no-thesis’ approach alluded to by Ayer is ubiquitous in Madhyamaka philosophy.

ātman-Brahman. Thus for Nāgārjuna it is the case that *ultimately*, the *pramāṇas* are not established, and nor are their objects (*prameyas*):

*yadi ca pramāṇataste teṣāṃ teṣāṃ prasiddhirarthānām /
teṣāṃ punaḥ prasiddhiṃ brūhī kathaṃ te pramāṇānām //31//*

*yadi ca pramāṇatasteṣāṃ teṣāmarthānām prameyāṇāṃ
prasiddhiṃ manyase yathā manairmeyānām teṣāmidānīm
pratyakṣānumānopamānāgamānām caturṇāṃ pramāṇānām
kutaḥ prasiddhiḥ / yadi tāvanniṣpramāṇānām pramāṇānām
syātprasiddhiḥ pramāṇato 'rthānām prasiddhiriti hīyate pratijñā /*

And if proof of these objects is established based on *pramāṇas* /
tell [me] how these *pramāṇas* are [in turn] established //31//

And if you think that such objects of true cognition are established
via the *pramāṇas* as a measuring instrument [establishes that
which is to be] measured, how are the four *pramāṇas* –
perception, inference, comparison, authority (*āgama*) –
established? If the *pramāṇas* may be established without
[recourse to] *pramāṇas*, [then your] proposition [that] ‘objects are
established via the *pramāṇas*’ is abandoned.

Here at VV 31, Nāgārjuna notes that his opponent argues for the existence of objects of valid knowledge because they can be perceived through the *pramāṇas*, which are the only true means of knowledge. According to his opponent, these *pramāṇas* thus give insight into the true nature of reality. However, the question is once again raised as to what it is that establishes the *pramāṇas* themselves (and so designates them as the tools by which true knowledge might be gained). Nāgārjuna is quick to bring in the relational characters of *pramāṇas* as the means of valid knowledge, and *prameyas* as the *objects* of valid knowledge. One does not make sense without the other: how can we have instruments of valid knowledge if we do not have objects of knowledge for the instruments to help us ‘know’? For the Naiyāyika opponent it is clearly the

case, then, that the objects of knowledge are ‘established’ by the *pramāṇas*, but what of the *pramāṇas* themselves?

Nāgārjuna asks how it might be the case that the *pramāṇas* establish something without first being established themselves. The problem here is twofold. First, accepting that the *pramāṇas* have a causal power to establish objects of knowledge (i.e. that the *pramāṇas* are the means through which we perceive reality) without asking what grounds the *pramāṇas* themselves is, at best, an example of unjustified dogmatism. It is at worst indicative of a short-sighted essentialism.¹⁰³ The significance of this type of accountability cannot be overstated – Nāgārjuna is, after all, a loyal Buddhist. His Buddhist praxis and philosophy revolves around the acceptance of radical change and radical interconnectivity through *pratītyasamutpāda*, but this commitment would be jeopardised by a dogmatic assertion of a permanent ‘grounds’ of knowledge. Second, if we *do* ask how the *pramāṇas* are established and conclude that they ‘prove themselves’, then we effectively say that they have *svabhāva*. The end result for Nāgārjuna is that mindlessly accepting the *pramāṇas* as ‘established’ leads to undesirable and untenable positions. We can assert their essential establishment without due consideration of the facts (based, for example, on religious tradition); we can explicitly make the argument that they are somehow self-established and so exist intrinsically with *svabhāva*; we can make some recourse to an infinite regress of causes, where each *pramāṇa* establishes another, which establishes another, which establishes another, and so on. At some point, one of these infinitely

¹⁰³ Nāgārjuna thinks that essentialism is impossible. More than that, he thinks that it is *demonstrably* impossible. With this in mind, holding that the *pramāṇas* ‘just are’ existent is, for Nāgārjuna, a lazy sidestep into an essentialism that makes little intellectual or practical sense.

regressed *pramāṇas* – established by innumerable other *pramāṇas* – then somehow establishes its *prameyas* as well.

Thus we read at VV 32:

*anyairyadi pramāṇaiḥ pramāṇasiddhirbhavettadanavasthā /
nādeḥ siddhistatrāsti naiva madhyasya nāntasya //32//*

*yadi punarmanyase pramāṇaiḥ prameyāṇāṃ prasiddhiteṣāṃ
pramāṇānāmanyaiḥ pramāṇaiḥ
prasiddhirevamanavasthāprasaṅgaḥ / anavasthāprasaṅge ko
doṣaḥ / anavasthāprasaṅga ādeḥ siddhirnāsti / kiṃ kāraṇam /
teṣāmapi hi pramāṇānāmanyaiḥ pramāṇaiḥ
prasiddhiteṣāmanyairiti nāstyādiḥ / āderasadbhāvāt kuto
madhyaṃ kuto 'ntaḥ / tasmātteṣāṃ pramāṇānāmanyaiḥ
pramāṇaiḥ prasiddhiriti yaduktaṃ tannopapadyata iti /*

If the *pramāṇas* are established by [other] *pramāṇas*, [then] there is an infinite series /
[This being the case,] neither the beginning, nor the middle, nor the end can be established //32//

If you think [that the] objects of true cognition (*prameya*) are established as such by the means of true cognition (*pramāṇas*), then there follows an infinite series (*anavasthāprasaṅga*). What fault [is there] in an infinite series? Because you think that these *pramāṇas* are established by other *pramāṇas*, and those other *pramāṇas* [through other *pramāṇas*], no beginning exists. Without a beginning, how [can there be] a middle and end? Consequently, your statement 'the *pramāṇas* are established by [other] *pramāṇas*' is not valid.

Toward the very end of VV 31, Nāgārjuna discusses the case for other *pramāṇas* establishing some other *pramāṇas*. But does this explanation work for us? At VV 32, Nāgārjuna argues that this is not an acceptable resolution to the issue of the *pramāṇas*' establishment. Why? Simply because from such a position, 'there follows an infinite series [*anavasthāprasaṅga*]', and this particular sort of infinite regress is undesirable. We already know

that Nāgārjuna is not afraid of accepting the occasional infinite regress – he fully accepts the infinite web of causation that is necessitated by *pratītyasamutpāda*, for example. The difference is that the regress currently under discussion is *vicious* rather than *virtuous*: Westerhoff explains that the regression is vicious ‘since the burden of proof is transferred in its entirety to the preceding stage, as a [single] epistemic instrument would have to establish all the succeeding ones’ (Westerhoff, 2017). The major difference between this type of infinite regress and the type of infinite regress present in discussion around *pratītyasamutpāda* is that in the latter case, one object or process is not 100% responsible for another. The very idea of *pratītyasamutpāda* is that everything is linked in inextricable, intimate ways. For every one object, there are huge numbers of intertwined causes and conditions. The Buddhist position is that this stands in each and every causal relationship to have ever come to pass, it is one of the most fundamental of conventional truths. Compare this to the infinite regress described at VV 31, where it is the case that every *pramāṇa* must be 100% established by a previous one, *ad infinitum*.

This point is elaborated upon in VV 32, where Nāgārjuna specifies that the nub of the problem with an infinite regress of this type is that ‘neither the beginning, nor the middle, nor the end can be established’. Beginnings, middles and ends are important in Buddhism. They are especially important in Madhyamaka, which is, after all, claimed to be the ‘middle way’ between the extremes of absolutism and annihilationism. Without an end, for example, liberation would be impossible – how might we end suffering if beginnings, middles and ends are not to be found? In our immediate context, if a beginning, middle and end of an entity such as a *pramāṇa* cannot be determined, then we run the risk of characterising it as eternal: how can an entity that has no

determinable beginning, middle or end possibly cause or be caused?¹⁰⁴ If the *pramāṇas* have an infinite regress to other *pramāṇas* (one instrument establishes another instrument, which establishes another instrument, which... etc.), then they must have a start point and an end point, lest any notion of causation be rendered incoherent. It seems that there needs to be an infinite trail of *pramāṇas* in order to validate even one single object of true cognition (*prameya*). Further, at which point would the infinite trail of *pramāṇas* terminate in order make the step to establish the object? It is difficult on these criteria to account for a process by which an infinite series of *pramāṇas* serving only to justify other *pramāṇas* then breaks from itself to establish not another *pramāṇa*, but a *prameya* instead. The upshot here is that if the *pramāṇas* establish other *pramāṇas*, then it seems that this is *all* that they could do. We would end up, for example, with the establishment of means of knowledge (a *pramāṇa*), but not of the thing known (a *prameya*).

There is also an extra issue for the Naiyāyika if they wish to claim that the *pramāṇas* somehow possess *svabhāva* (and we have seen that they do indeed want to make this claim) and yet still have this reliance on other *pramāṇas*. Discounting for a moment Nāgārjuna's argument against infinite regressions, if *pramāṇas* self-establish in virtue of their *svabhāva* (recall from VV 9 that the objectors do indeed think that existent objects possess *svabhāva*), they cannot possibly establish other objects (namely the *prameyas*) that also presumably possess a *svabhāva*. Nāgārjuna argues at MMK 15.1-2:

*na saṃbhavaḥ svabhāvasya yuktaḥ pratyayahetubhiḥ /
hetupratyayasambhūtaḥ svabhāvaḥ kṛtako bhavet //1//*

¹⁰⁴ If the *pramāṇas* are established in virtue of their *svabhāva*, then they are – when *svabhāva* is understood in ontological terms – necessarily eternal.

*svabhāvaḥ kṛtako nāma bhaviṣyati punaḥ katham /
akṛtrimaḥ svabhāva hi nirakpekṣaḥ paratra ca //2//*

[An] intrinsic nature dependent upon causes and conditions is not possible /

[An] intrinsic nature [that is] produced from causes and conditions would be a product //1//

But how [can there] exist an intrinsic nature [that is] produced? /
For an unproduced intrinsic nature is independent of anything else
//2//

Taken in context, the result would be that if each *pramāṇa* has an intrinsic nature, and if each *prameya* has an intrinsic nature, each *pramāṇa* could not possibly establish each (or indeed any) *prameya*. The reasoning is very simple: for one thing to establish another is for one thing to cause another. For Nāgārjuna, such causation can only be accounted for in conventional terms, viz. in virtue of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), and so an intrinsically existent entity causing another intrinsically existent entity is a non-starter. The very definition of being intrinsically existent (and so possessing *svabhāva*) is – according to Nāgārjuna – to be uncaused by anything else. It is for this reason that emptiness takes primacy in his philosophy, for it is only because of the emptiness of all entities that any change can occur, and thus it is via emptiness that liberation is possible. This is the central thesis of the *MMK*. For Nāgārjuna then, if both *pramāṇas* and *prameyas* have *svabhāva*, then it is simply impossible for one to be established by the other. Indeed, it is impossible for the *pramāṇas* to be established whatsoever:

*teṣāmatha pramāṇairvinā prasiddhirvihīyate vādaḥ /
vaiṣamikatvaṃ tasminviśeṣahetuśca vaktavyaḥ //33//*

*atha manyase teṣāṃ pramāṇānāṃ vinā pramāṇaiḥ prasiddhiḥ
prameyāṇāṃ punararthhānāṃ pramāṇaiḥ prasiddhiriti evaṃ sati
yaste vādaḥ pramāṇaiḥ prasiddhirarthhānāṃ itis a hīyate /
vaiṣamikatvaṃ ca bhavati keṣāṃcidarthhānāṃ pramāṇaiḥ
prasiddhiḥ keṣāṃcinneti / viśeṣahetuśca vaktavyo yena hetunā*

*keṣāṃcidarhtānāṃ pramāṇaiḥ prasiddhiḥ keṣāṃcinneti / sa ca
nopadiṣṭaḥ / tasmādiyamapi kalpanā nopapanneti /*

[OR:] *atrāha / pramāṇānyeva svātmānaṃ parātmānaṃ ca
prasādhayanti / yathoktaṃ /*

*dyotayati svātmānaṃ yathā hutāśastathā parātmānaṃ /
svāparātmānāvevaṃ prasādhayanti pramāṇānīti //*

[NR:] *yathāgniḥ svātmānaṃ parātmānaṃ ca prakāśayati tathaiva
pramāṇāni prasādhayanti svātmānaṃ parātmānaṃ ceti /
atrocyate /*

[If you think that] these [*pramāṇas*] are established without the
pramāṇas, [then] your doctrine is abandoned /
[There is an] inequality, and you should state the special reason
[for this inequality] //33//

Now, [if] you think that those *pramāṇas* are established without
[recourse to other] *pramāṇas*, [but that] the objects of true
cognition are, however, established through the *pramāṇas*, [then]
your doctrine that [all] objects are established through the
pramāṇas is abandoned. There is an inequality: some objects are
established through the *pramāṇas*, and some are not. The reason
for this inequality – why some objects are established by the
pramāṇas and others are not – should be stated, but it is not
specified. Thus, this hypothesis too is not justified.

[Opponent's reply:]

The *pramāṇas* prove themselves as well as others. As it is said:

‘As fire illuminates itself and other objects, so too do the
pramāṇas prove themselves and others.’

[Nāgārjuna's reply:]

As fire illuminates itself and others, so do the *pramāṇas* prove
themselves and other objects. [To this] we say...¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Nāgārjuna leaves open the last sentence – he goes on in subsequent verses (I do not intend to address the ensuing verses in detail here) to attack the idea that fire is self-illuminating and argues that if fire illuminates itself, it must also be said to consume itself; an absurd position to hold.

Having established that the Naiyāyikas cannot feasibly hold that the *pramāṇas* are established by other *pramāṇas*, Nāgārjuna now pits this conclusion against the Naiyāyika assumption that the *pramāṇas* establish the objects of cognition (*prameyas*). Thus at VV 33, he asks how it can be the case that the *pramāṇas* establish *prameyas* but cannot establish themselves:

Now, [if] you think that those *pramāṇas* are established without [recourse to other] *pramāṇas* [but that] the objects of true cognition, are, however, established through the *pramāṇas*, [then] your doctrine that [all] objects are established through the *pramāṇas* is abandoned.

This argument is relatively straightforward. If the *pramāṇas* are not established via other *pramāṇas*, then the thesis that everything knowable is established via the *pramāṇas* fails. This is because the *pramāṇas* themselves are apparently not established via themselves or by other things of the same type. Why is this a problem? Simply because the *pramāṇas* are supposed to be *known to us*. The idea is that all psycho-physical objects can be known via the *pramāṇas*, but according to Nāgārjuna's refutations laid out here, the *pramāṇas* themselves cannot be known – an obvious pitfall. We need to know what our means of valid knowledge are before we know if they have been deployed in such a way that we have gained valid knowledge. The idea of valid knowledge is useless to us unless we *know* that there are definite ways by which we can acquire it. The second problem to be explained is, according to Nāgārjuna, that the Naiyāyika apparently holds the position that the *pramāṇas* establish the *prameyas*, but the *pramāṇas* themselves remain unestablished. Thus,

[t]here is an inequality: some objects are established through the *pramāṇas*, and some are not. The reason for this inequality – why

some objects are established by the *pramāṇas* and others are not – should be stated, but it is not specified. Thus, this hypothesis too is not justified.

The Naiyāyikas do not specify why this seemingly arbitrary distinction is made – why is it that some things are established by the *pramāṇas* and other things are not? The response from the Nyāya adherent is that '[a]s fire illuminates itself and other objects, so too do the *pramāṇas* prove themselves and others.' This is, to Nāgārjuna, simply absurd: he holds that if fire illuminates itself, it must also be said to consume itself. Given that this analogy is absurd, so too is the idea that *pramāṇas* establish themselves and other objects in the same way. For Nāgārjuna, much as fire cannot illuminate itself unless it also consumes and destroys itself, the *pramāṇas* cannot establish themselves without falling into the same trap of absurdity.

So what is left of the *pramāṇas*? It would, I think, be to place the cart before the horse to argue that because Nāgārjuna thinks that there are no established *pramāṇas* he also thinks that there is no knowledge. If this were the case, his own Buddhist project would be fatally undermined.¹⁰⁶ If we cannot know *anything*, then the means to liberation is compromised. Further, even knowing that there *can be any liberation* would be on this account, it seems, impossible. We could not know about *pratītyasamutpāda*, we could not know about the Four Noble Truths, we could not know that the Buddha's methods work, and so on for all aspects of Buddhist praxis. We would not even be able to know about dissatisfaction (*duḥkha*) broadly construed, and so would not know that we are dissatisfied! It should go without saying that Nāgārjuna does not want to completely undermine the Buddhist path – he is a Buddhist, and he

¹⁰⁶ There are those that think that it is! Burton (2001) is one such example.

thinks that the Buddha's methods for liberation are efficacious. Clearly, then, Nāgārjuna acknowledges that we can *know* things about the world. The issue is clearly one of 'establishment', which is to say it is a problem of proving intrinsic existence. *Pramāṇas* establish the existence of *prameyas* and it is by using the framework that results from this interaction that Naiyāyikas build their definitions of correct knowledge. It is important to bear in mind that these endeavours are not fundamentally concerned with explaining the world as it is (as is for example, the modern scientific/empirical method), but rather with explaining how we might reach liberation. The same is true for Nāgārjuna. It is soteriological aims which underpin all of this wrangling, not a scientific understanding of the world. To put it in starker terms, Nāgārjuna is concerned with a prescriptive account of liberation, not with a descriptive account of reality.

Instead, I propose a more nuanced reading – one that is in principle acceptable to Śāṅkara when it comes to knowledge of the world around us. Nāgārjuna clearly thinks that the *pramāṇas* cannot exist ultimately, and I think that for the Mādhyamika, a knock-on effect of this stance is that they cannot give an account of the ultimate, either. We are faced then with a situation in which the *pramāṇas* offer – at best – a conventional explanation of the world around us. That is to say that whilst the *pramāṇas* might be useful tools in navigating the conventional world, they offer no input as regards the status of the ultimate. It seems to me that Śāṅkara must also broadly subscribe to this view, for although he allows recourse to *pramāṇas* in order to facilitate liberating insight, he also holds that *ultimately*, such means of knowledge are formulaic, largely reliant on language and consequently ineffective. It seems to me that for Śāṅkara, the *pramāṇas* are *conventional* insofar as they allow a practitioner to discern truth *within the world of māyā*. The end goal is to transcend the world of *māyā*. Although liberation does not consist in physically

moving beyond the world of illusion, it does require an intuitive *gnosis* of the Absolute *ātman-Brahman*, and in the end, it is only this *gnosis* that matters: all attempts to capture it, describe it and so on are, as we have seen, doomed to failure. As such, even in a situation where there is belief in an Absolute and the end goal is some *gnosis* of it, the *pramāṇas* must be ultimately inadequate in providing any definitive knowledge of it. The *pramāṇas* can orientate, but they cannot strictly be used as a yardstick against which the ultimate is to be measured. This would, I suggest, need to be Śaṅkara's final position.

It would be tempting to argue that this is also necessarily true of Nāgārjuna's position. Indeed, I suspect that Bhattacharya would argue this, and I am convinced that a thinker like Murti would, too.¹⁰⁷ It cannot, however, be the case that Nāgārjuna holds an identical view to Śaṅkara on this matter. It might be the case that Nāgārjuna could in principle assign some value to the *pramāṇas* in much the same way that Śaṅkara does.¹⁰⁸ That is to say that Nāgārjuna could in principle view the *pramāṇas* as useful conventional designations that provide practitioners with a yardstick by which to measure what is *conventionally true*. As a Buddhist, he would of course have recourse to fewer *pramāṇas* than Śaṅkara (Buddhists generally allow only two (sometimes three, as we saw earlier): perception and inference), but these two can in principle be useful in navigating the world as it is experienced conventionally. As is the case for Śaṅkara, Nāgārjuna

¹⁰⁷ R. Ninian Smart pulls no punches when he writes that 'Murti, who disliked having foreign and homegrown untouchables studying works flowing from a sacred revelation (he was a *Brahmin*, of course), thought that his version of Madhyamaka was a "poor man's Advaita"' (McCagney, 1997: xi). This attitude manifests in Murti's writing and – owing to his citing of Murti's ideas – risks being represented in the writing of Bhattacharya.

¹⁰⁸ It at least seems to me that Śaṅkara *should* view the *pramāṇas* in this way.

too would need to jettison the notion that the *pramāṇas* can provide some sort of *ultimate knowledge*. We have seen in the discussion of the VV above that Nāgārjuna's real issue with the *pramāṇas* is twofold: first, he argues against the idea that the *pramāṇas* are or can be 'ultimately' established. That is simply to say that he does not think that the *pramāṇas* could have *svabhāva*. With this being the case, they are not in a position to 'establish' that which exists with *svabhāva* (for the Advaitin, this would be the *ātman-Brahman*). This is, of course, the second issue with which Nāgārjuna grapples: the *scope* of the *pramāṇas*. How can that which is not 'established' itself (i.e. that which does not have *svabhāva*) then 'establish' something else (with a *svabhāva*)? In other words, how might an unestablished *pramāṇa* establish a *prameya* (that to be known; the *ātman-Brahman*)? Interestingly, the issue of scope also presents itself for the Advaitin, albeit in a different way than it presents for the Mādhyamika. I shall explain how this is the case.

Although the Advaitin must concede the inadequacy of the *pramāṇas* in capturing the ultimate character of the *ātman-Brahman*, they do still have a use in terms of the ultimate: they confirm that *there is* an ultimate/Absolute. Indeed, we have seen at the beginning of this subsection that for Śaṅkara, it is the authority of scripture that proves the existence of the *Brahman*. These same scriptures then use analogy to build on the assertion of *Brahman's* existence in order that we might orientate ourselves towards it. The difference between the role of *pramāṇas* for the Advaitin and the role of *pramāṇas* for the Mādhyamika is then that for the Advaitin, even if they do not (indeed they *cannot*) provide any true account of the ultimate's real nature (which is ineffable), they do at least establish something as ultimately immanent. For the Mādhyamika, the *pramāṇas* as accounted for in the literature of the Advaitins – much like that of the Naiyāyikas – cannot account for anything in an ultimate sense. Nāgārjuna thus rejects the

pramāṇas so conceived by his opponents, though I do not think that he would strictly need to disregard them in a conventional sense if it was accepted that they have no *svabhāva*.¹⁰⁹ In such a scenario, the *pramāṇas* might provide some expedient means by which we can navigate the world of convention. But this is all that the *pramāṇas* could do, and this is a very limited application. If the *pramāṇas* do not account for anything in an ultimate sense, then why bother with them at all? They are, after all, designed to protect the practitioner against error and mistaken positions by providing a metric through which they can ascertain ‘true’ statements and beliefs about the world.

McCagney writes that whilst Nāgārjuna and his followers did not explicitly answer questions regarding how the mind objectifies concepts or about the nature of error, neither did they simply disregard them (1997: 42). The point for Nāgārjuna is, I am at pains to repeat, not to give an account of the world, but to give an account of the means to liberation. McCagney writes about the nature of error that ‘such questions were dismissed for philosophical and soteriological reasons. The Madhyamaka effort concerned the radical purification of mental fictions rather than an explanation of error’ (1997: 42). As such, I think that we can assume that Nāgārjuna’s reluctance to speak about *pramāṇas* outside of his argument with the Naiyāyikas stems from his seeing both the *pramāṇas* and further discussion of them as a waste of time. After all, the Madhyamaka project is not to system build, but to tear down systems systematically! Nāgārjuna

¹⁰⁹ This would stand in contrast to Buddhists like Dharmakīrti who have no qualms about integrating *svabhāva* into theoretical frameworks. For Dharmakīrti, *svabhāva* and ‘essential connections’ are crucial to his account of inference. Of course, Dharmakīrti also argues for the existence of ultimately real *dharmas*, something that Nāgārjuna vociferously disputes.

takes seriously *prapañca* (conceptual proliferation), and it seems to me that he would likely consider the *pramāṇas* to be an instance of conceptual proliferation; a pointless reification that serves no real soteriological purpose.

With what, then, are we left? Nāgārjuna does not view the *pramāṇas* as useful expedients by which to remove error, false views and so on. Instead, they are at worst a manifestation of those false views (especially if as the Naiyāyikas claim, they have *svabhāva*) and do more harm than good. At best, they are needless reifications that do no real work. Even if they could tell us something about the conventional world, this is for Nāgārjuna inadequate, for we have already noted that he is not at all interested in giving an account of the world. Instead, Nāgārjuna thinks that we can simply undercut the work allegedly done by the *pramāṇas*. As McCagney puts it, '[t]he point, for the Mādhyamikas, is not to understand the source of error, but to eliminate it' (1997: 43), and Nāgārjuna's preferred means of achieving this is not by talking about concepts and phenomena and judging them according to *pramāṇas*, but by simply halting the reification and proliferation of concepts to begin with. Obviously, this is a radical, fundamental aim. The *pramāṇas* cannot exist with *svabhāva* and as such are as transient and reified as the next concept. Treating them as some peculiarly established thing by which we can attain an established 'knowledge' is a problem – put simply, *nothing* is established because nothing exists independently of another (viz. nothing exists with *svabhāva*).

McCagney discusses the 'establishment' of entities at some length. She sums up the Nāgārjunian notion thus (1997: 60):

[N]o event [or entity] can exist independently of another since it would depend on there being another from which it could differ. If

the event [or entity] did have independent existence (*svabhāva*), it could not exist in relation (dependent on conditions) and so it could not exist at all. And if *svabhāva* (self-nature) causes another event [or entity] to arise, that event [or entity] would be "other-nature" and the original condition would not exist independently or essentially.

All of this metaphysical deconstruction relies on *śūnyatā* – the emptiness of *svabhāva* – of all entities. McCagney instead translates *śūnyatā* as ‘openness’, which is probably not as much of a stretch as it first seems. If we think of a vast, open space, we might say that it is ‘empty’. McCagney repeatedly forces the point that in various places in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā*, *śūnyatā* is used in conjunction with metaphors of space (*ākāśa*), writing that ‘[t]he symbols in early *Prajñāpāramitā* texts show that the Mahayana notion of *ākāśa* derives from meditation (*dhyāna*) on the sky, which is experienced as vast, luminous and without boundaries’ (1997: XX). This would mean that Nāgārjuna’s equation of *śūnyatā* and *pratītyasamutpāda* amounts to an endorsement of ‘the openness or limitlessness of events’ (1997: XX), which does not in turn imply anything permanent (*nitya*), unmade (*akriyate*), independent (*nirapekṣaḥ paratra*), or without causes and conditions (*ahetu pratyaya*). In other words, Nāgārjuna is equating the openness or limitlessness of events with a lack of *svabhāva*, which is indeed permanent, unmade, independent, and without causes and conditions.

I want to insist here that Nāgārjuna (and so the Madhyamaka in general) repeatedly denies that *anything* can be substantial, permanent, uncaused and independent. It should then be obvious that this includes any substantial entity such as the *ātman-Brahman*. Even when the diligent Mādhyamika moves beyond such dualisms as existence and nonexistence – asserting neither for fear of inadvertently attaching oneself to a view (*dṛṣṭi*), the question, such as it is,

remains open-ended. Nāgārjuna does not appear to be denying that things appear to exist, only that things exist *ultimately*; permanently, uncaused, self-sufficiently, with *svabhāva*. They do not exist in the manner in which we uncritically take them to exist. As nonexistence is defined in opposition to existence, he does not claim that any entity does not exist, either. Buddhapālita (translated by Paul Williams) writes that

(57) Therefore the meaning of dependent designation is precisely that an entity which is dependently designated cannot be said to be existent or nonexistent because it is completely empty of intrinsic nature. [But] there is no fault in a conventional statement (*tha snyad kyi tshig*, probably *vyavahāra-vacana* or *-vākya*).

He continues further, clarifying why this is the case:

(58) How is it logically possible to say that the Tathāgata, who is dependently designated, either exists or does not exist? For if a Tathāgata existed, he would just exist, even without an appropriation, but he does not exist without an appropriation. How can one who does not exist without an appropriation be said to exist? How, too, can a Tathāgata who is dependently designated be said not to exist? For a nonexistent *uḍumbara* flower cannot be designated.

(Williams, 2005: 33-34)

The idea here is that the Madhyamaka position that anything that does not exist with *svabhāva* is ‘dependently designated’. It is because the Mādhyamika rejects the claim that anything exists with *svabhāva* that they must also stop short of asserting existence or nonexistence. For the Mādhyamika, existence and nonexistence are similarly problematic trappings: real ‘existence’ (with *svabhāva*) denotes entities that are immutable and *ahetu pratyaya*; real ‘nonexistence’ (without *svabhāva*) would thus denote entities that did not appear in the first place. This is very clearly *not* what Nāgārjuna and his followers think is going on in the

world. If existence by/with *svabhāva* obtained in the world, then every existent entity would be ultimately grounded in virtue of its ultimately existent intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*). Any existent entity must have *svabhāva* (and so must *necessarily* exist). It cannot do otherwise. This means it cannot come into existence, change, or go out of existence (because for Nāgārjuna, to have *svabhāva* is to be permanently, necessarily existent). The significance of this understanding of the world cannot be overstated. According to that same *svabhāva* doctrine, then, it is impossible for there to be an entity without *svabhāva* because all existent entities necessarily have *svabhāva*.¹¹⁰ To speak of a nonexistent entity is then nonsensical. Hence Buddhapālita's insistence that the Mādhyamika assert neither existence nor nonexistence: neither is appropriate, both result in states of affairs that are demonstrably false. Instead, Buddhapālita follows Nāgārjuna in claiming that entities cannot exist by *svabhāva*, but can and do exist *conventionally* as designations.¹¹¹

The point of refusing to subscribe to a *dṛṣṭi* that asserts either existence or nonexistence is purely soteriological. As we have already seen, the Mādhyamika method aims not to give an account of the world, but instead to expedite our liberation from *duḥkha* (dissatisfaction). To assert a monism in an entity akin to the *ātman-Brahman* is for Nāgārjuna a manifestation of *avidyā* (ignorance; mischaracterisation) in much the same way that asserting the ultimacy of a

¹¹⁰ This might seem a peculiar way to use a phrase such as 'existent entity'. The idea is that an entity with *svabhāva* is basic, like the *dharma*s with which Nāgārjuna is so concerned. For such an entity to be 'really existent', it must exist with *svabhāva*. If it does not, then it is derivatively existent, not ultimate and 'not really existent'.

¹¹¹ Even 'exists' is here used only conventionally, viz. without any substance (*svabhāva*) underpinning it.

pramāṇa or a *dharma* is *avidyā*. It is to reify a concept under which nothing really falls and assign it a permanence that is according to Nāgārjuna demonstrably impossible. This stands in stark opposition to Śāṅkara and subsequent Advaitins, for whom – as we have seen – the permanent (*nitya*) uncaused (*aheṭu*) *ātman-Brahman* is the solution to *avidyā* (ignorance; misconception) and all that *avidyā* entails.

It should now be clear why Nāgārjuna jettisons the very notion of *pramāṇas* after attacking them in the *VV*: *pramāṇas* are nothing but instantiations of *prapañca*, and such instantiations ought to be removed at the root. Each *pramāṇa* is a *dṛṣṭi*: it is a view regarding what can or cannot be considered a means to valid knowledge and in turn establishes the *prameya* (thing to be known). They – as we have seen – usually apply to metaphysical concerns such as the nature of Reality (knowledge of the *ātman-Brahman*). Part of Nāgārjuna's issue with *pramāṇas* then is that he does not think that they can actually do anything given that *svabhāva* cannot exist – this has been demonstrated above. The other part of the issue is that Nāgārjuna does not think that there is an ultimate reality to be known via these means of knowledge. How can an epistemic instrument provide a means to knowledge about an entity that cannot be established as existent? We cannot know about what is not there to be known! By extension, the *ātman-Brahman* is not established primarily because Nāgārjuna thinks that all phenomena are 'selfless' (lacking *svabhāva*) and insubstantial (*nairātmya*). If the *ātman-Brahman* were existent in the way that Advaitins require it to be, it would exist with *svabhāva* and so have substantiality: indeed, it could be the *only* substantial entity and the *only* *svabhāva*.

§4: Advaita and Buddhism

In this section, I will give a brief account of the relationship between Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism, illustrating some doctrinal developments from Gauḍapāda and Śaṅkara and their relation to Buddhist doctrines. From there, I will attempt to demarcate how Śaṅkara viewed contemporary Buddhist schools, and then detail some important ways in which both the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra schools differ from Śaṅkaran Advaita in relation to seeking liberation within a substantial Absolute. Given that out of the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra schools it is generally thought that it is the Yogācāra that veers most closely to an Advaitin form of Buddhism, this section will primarily be concerned with Vasubandhu's conception of Yogācāra. My intention in focussing on Vasubandhu is primarily to demonstrate that despite claims from scholars such as Bhattacharya and Murti, absolutism need not be a necessary consequence of Yogācāra philosophy.

First, to the *Upaniṣads*. Frank Whaling (1979: 21) attests that taking the *Upaniṣads* literally when they make positive attributions to the *ātman-Brahman* was traditionally the norm: Hindu predecessors to Śaṅkara's forerunner, Gauḍapāda, had indeed 'taken the Upaniṣadic creation texts literally', and though they taught the sole reality of *Brahman*, they had also 'allowed the possibility of modifications in Brahman, and even of parts to Brahman' (1979: 21). It was Gauḍapāda that rejected the apparent dualism of unity and diversity within *Brahman* and 'insisted that duality was unreal and that *advaita* [non-duality] was ultimate' (Whaling, 1979: 21), and so it was really with Gauḍapāda that the big doctrinal switch was made in Advaita.

Gauḍapāda, writes Whaling, was then the first Advaitin to systematically reform Vedānta: he rejected the traditional view of ritual as a means to liberation; stressed ‘the identity of the *jīva* and Brahman, and insisted that their difference was only apparent’; rejected the early Vedas as authoritative, and rejected the contemporary Vedāntin view that ‘there was a genuine transformation of Brahman into the world and the world into Brahman’ (1979: 22). Gauḍapāda was undoubtedly a reformer.

Whilst Whaling concedes that it is at least *possible* that such a Vedāntin revolution could have been entirely internal, he concludes that on the balance of probabilities, it is much more likely that Gauḍapāda was either directly or indirectly influenced by Buddhism than it is that a newly-reformed Vedānta influenced the comparably strong and well-established Mahāyāna schools (Whaling, 1979: 22-23). Importantly, Whaling argues that this ‘does not mean that [Gauḍapāda] has become a Buddhist or that he has forsaken Vedānta’, but only that he has ‘merely reinterpreted the message of the Upaniṣads in the language and thought forms of his day, and in so doing, he paved the way for Śaṅkara to carry on his work in a more systematic way’ (1979: 21). It was with Gauḍapāda that Advaita began to take its form most recognisable to us today, and it is from Gauḍapāda, says Whaling, that Śaṅkara inherited the means by which he would expound Advaita in contrast to Buddhism.

It is in consideration of contact between the newly-reformed Advaita and the established Buddhist schools that Whaling (1979: 5) asks ‘[d]id Śaṅkara understand Buddhism?’ This is of significance to this work, because Śaṅkara’s understanding of Buddhism (or, potentially, lack thereof) is of some significance when attempting to eke out points of conflict between Buddhism

and Advaita. Furthermore, determining – as best we can, at any rate – what Śaṅkara actually thought about his Buddhist contemporaries is perhaps the best way of establishing if Śaṅkara saw for himself the similarities that Bhattacharya apparently does between his doctrine and those of the Buddhists. This is especially relevant if – as I am inclined to think – Buddhist schools contemporary to Śaṅkara (such as Madhyamaka) do not actually share or endorse his type of absolutism.

Obviously, this question is different to the one initially posed by Bhattacharya, which effectively asks if the Buddha is an Advaitin,¹¹² but I hope that the pertinence that the question of Śaṅkara's relationship to Buddhism has to the wider question asked by Bhattacharya is so obvious as to negate the need for any further justification. In examining the relationship between Advaita and the *Upaniṣads*, I hope to glean some sort of understanding relating to Bhattacharya's own obvious predilection for an Advaitic reading of the *Upaniṣads* and the means by which this might affect his view of both precanonical and canonical Buddhism.

It might be thought that if the Buddha had effectively been espousing the same doctrine as Śaṅkara, then Śaṅkara would himself would have recognised this and been aware of portions of – if not most of – the contemporary Buddhist corpus. Whether or not he would admit this is a different matter – it is possible that such an acknowledgement by Śaṅkara was prevented owing

¹¹² Ostensibly, Bhattacharya presents a thesis that the Buddha re-hashes pre-existing *Upaniṣadic* ideas in a novel way, viz. that he placed less emphasis on the philosophy, and more emphasis on the path. The implication seems to be that this novelty is the reason why Buddhism survived as a path distinct from the Advaita that it somehow duplicates. Nevertheless, Bhattacharya thinks that the Buddha's path affirms in every significant way the existence of the *Upaniṣadic ātman-Brahman* (2015: 209-210), and further, that this advocates the same sort of liberation as popularised by Śaṅkara. If true, this would make the Buddha – at least in principle – an Advaitin of the same sort as Śaṅkara. (Technically, I suppose, it would make Śaṅkara an Advaitin of the same sort as the Buddha!)

to sectarian reasons. I suspect that for Bhattacharya, this issue might be no more than peripheral, for if, as he argues in his book, the Buddha simply laid a soteriological path based upon *Upaniṣadic* doctrine, Śaṅkara's doing the same centuries later is simply testament to the veracity and validity of those very same *Upaniṣads*. There is nothing strange in and of itself in the idea that two people restated the same ideas at two separate points in time, especially if, as argued, their starting points were the same. Thus, the real point of interest is in the Buddha's alleged adherence to *Upaniṣadic* principles. How we understand what these *Upaniṣadic* principles actually are, however, relies on numerous factors, not least of which are the significantly different interpretations of the same scriptures by different Hindu schools, none of which I have the space or time to cover in any great detail. Additionally, it is nevertheless a point of historical fact that Buddhism developed as a tradition outside of and not cognate with, Hindu thought in general. If the Buddha really did expound the same doctrine as both the *Upaniṣads* and Śaṅkara, then we might expect there to be an explanation for this quirk of history, and it would not be unreasonable to expect this reason to be already well established. On balance, then, investigating the links between Śaṅkaran Advaita and its contemporary Buddhist schools might prove fruitful in determining how best to read both the *Upaniṣadic* conception of *ātman-Brahman* and its relation to the Buddhism of the Nikāyas and the Mahāyāna.

On the question of Śaṅkara's understanding of Buddhism, Whaling has a lot to say. First, he argues that Śaṅkara himself recognised – and thus, presumably engaged with – three Buddhist schools: the Sarvāstivādins, Mādhyamikas, and the Yogācārins. We immediately notice that Śaṅkara does not appear to engage with the 'precanonical' Buddhism with which Lindtner, Bhattacharya and Albahari are all concerned. This is at least partly understandable given that it

was not the Theravāda that was present in India during Śaṅkara's lifetime, but the Mahāyāna, and so, even with its waning influence, it is natural that it is the Mahāyāna that bore the full extent of Śaṅkara's criticism. In narrower terms relevant to the current project, it is worth recalling that Bhattacharya claims that it is the Mahāyāna schools of Buddhism 'which put things right' in terms of how *ātman* is treated doctrinally (2015: 39), and so Śaṅkara's focus on these three Mahāyāna schools is for these reasons unproblematic. His attitudes to these schools, in fact, should allow us to gain insight into Śaṅkara's wider views relating to Buddhist doctrine, and thus allow us to begin to assess the extent to which he himself – and consequently, his system of Advaita – was influenced by Buddhism. This should in turn allow us to make some sort of judgement regarding the precise extent to which Advaita and the Mahāyāna accord; a crucial point if there is any weight to Bhattacharya's assertion that it was the Mahāyāna 'which put things right' in terms of reverting back to the *Upaniṣadic* conception of *ātman-Brahman* (2015: 39).

Whaling (1979: 4) argues that as Śaṅkara's arguments against Sarvāstivādin doctrine coincide with those of Bhāskara, we can probably adduce that these criticisms are not original to Śaṅkara, but are both drawn 'from the same common source', viz. these arguments are the stock Vedāntin refutations against the Sarvāstivādins. The generic Vedāntin response to the Sarvāstivādin *dharma* theory is that if 'basic elements did exist and act independently, then there [is] no reason why they should ever cease to do so, thus the conditions for cessation of activity in the sense of *nirvāṇa* would be jeopardised' (1979: 4). The idea here being that if there were independently existent atomic particles making up the entirety of what we perceive as reality, then there could be no hope of liberation. Why is this? Well, because if reality really does consist

of independent elements that express their reality in spite of the other elements around them, there is no reason to suppose that we can affect these independent elements and stop their expression in order to bring about liberation. In other words, independently existent particles of this sort would necessarily be such that we could not affect their existence (because they are independently existent and so are unaffected by the operations of existent particles or forces outside of themselves). This takes a particularly problematic turn when we think of defilements and negative traits. If suffering is the manifestation of independently-existent atomic particles (as it necessarily has to be if the whole of reality consists of these particles), then there is no reason to suppose that we can ever stop these particles from expressing their realities (viz. we could not stop the relevant *dharmas* from expressing defilements and so propagating suffering). Very simply, we could not bring about the cessation of activity that supposedly characterises *nirvāṇa*. For the Advaitin, this particular problem is conveniently bypassed: reality consists of *ātman-Brahman* and the empirical world is no more than an ultimately unreal expression of *Brahman*: only *Brahman* is real, and everything in the empirical world derives a sort of conventional, contingent reality from the ultimate reality of *Brahman* (Rambachan, 2006: 77).

Interestingly, the Vedāntin argument against such essentially existent atomic elements is very similar to that offered by Nāgārjuna in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* and by Vasubandhu in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*. Against Sarvāstivādin *dharma* theory, Nāgārjuna claimed that *nirvāṇa* could not be existent without being characterised by old age and death, which would in

turn mean that *nirvāṇa*, is *conditioned* rather than *ultimate*.¹¹³ In a similar vein to the Advaitins, Nāgārjuna argues throughout the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* that if the basic elements of empirical reality that combine to constitute all psycho-physical phenomena (the Sarvāstivādin *dharma*s) were independently existent, immutable and permanent, there could be no hope for liberation. Why not? For precisely the same reason put forth by Śāṅkara: their immutability means that they will never stop being the way they are; nothing we could possibly do would ever affect such independent, self-sufficient entities. This in turn means that the change in conditions required for liberation can never (and could never in the future) be achieved. This, think both Śāṅkara and Nāgārjuna, negates the possibility of independently existent, permanent elements existing in a world where liberation is possible. As liberation is the highest goal and – significantly – regarded as an accurate scriptural inference (as well as being demonstrably possible), the existence of permanent, independently existent atomic elements is rejected.

¹¹³ MMK 25.4-5:

*bhāvas tāvan na nirvāṇaṃ jarāmaraṇalakṣaṇaṃ /
prasajyetāsti bhāvo hi na jarāmaraṇaṃ vinā //4//*

*bhāvaś ca yadi nirvāṇaṃ nirvāṇaṃ saṃskṛtaṃ bhavet /
nāsaṃskṛto hi vidyate bhāvaḥ kva cana kaś cana //5//*

Nirvāṇa is not an existent; [if it were, its having] the characteristics of decay and death would follow /

No existent is without [the characteristics of] decay and death //4//

And if *nirvāṇa* were an existent, *nirvāṇa* would be conditioned /

An unconditioned existent is never found anywhere //5//

To elaborate, for the Madhyamaka Buddhists as well as the Advaitins, anything that is empirically existent is not – and what is more, cannot be – ultimately existent.¹¹⁴ On the face of things, though, this looks problematic for Bhattacharya's claim that the Buddhist *nirvāṇa* is identical with the *Upaniṣadic ātman-Brahman*. Śaṅkara (and, we may assume, by extension, Bhattacharya) characterise the *Brahman* as being – in the words of Rambachan – 'timeless and present in all states and mental conditions' (2006: 21). There looks to be a degree of tension here if the *Brahman* is timeless and ever-present (eternal and thus *unconditioned*) but the *nirvāṇa* with which this *Brahman* is supposed to be identical is nonexistent (read: not *ultimately* existent) and thus *conditioned* (impermanent, unreal). I do not think it controversial to postulate that Bhattacharya would respond that from the ultimate perspective, there is only an *apparent* tension and that Nāgārjuna is advocating the transcendence of descriptions like 'existent', 'nonexistent', 'conditioned' and 'unconditioned'. On this I concede that he would be – in part, at

¹¹⁴ Hugh Nicholson points out that this sort of distinction between conditioned and unconditioned was a distinctly Śaṅkaran progression in Advaita, writing that Śaṅkara 'introduced a hitherto unknown distinction between the conditioned and unconditioned forms of brahman' that was 'perhaps borrow[ed] from some version of the Buddhist Two Truths doctrine' (Nicholson, 2007: 531). We find superficial parallels regarding the conditioned and unconditioned in Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. Some examples can be found at 1.10, 5.2 and 7.16 where Nāgārjuna argues that whatever exists in dependence (viz. is conditioned) is necessarily without an intrinsic nature, and whatever entity is without an intrinsic nature or defining characteristic (*svabhāva*) is unreal (not ultimately real). At 7.33, Nāgārjuna goes one further and shows that this is only part of the story: the unconditioned cannot be ultimately real, either. This is why the similarities are only superficial: Nāgārjuna thinks that because we cannot ultimately explain how conditioned things exist, then we cannot ultimately explain how unconditioned things exist, either. For this reason, both 'conditioned' and 'unconditioned' entities and states are ultimately unreal, and Madhyamaka philosophy undergoes a divergence from, rather than a convergence with, the sort of liberation attested by Śaṅkaran Advaita. For this reason, it cannot be claimed that the Mahāyānists 'put things right' in relation to the *Upaniṣadic ātman-Brahman*. Very simply, the troubles associated with clinging to any sort of permanent entity whilst simultaneously seeking liberation should preclude the Mādhyamika from positing any entity of a similar sort to the *ātman-Brahman*. For the Advaitin, even though the *Brahman* is ultimately nondual and beyond conception, it is at least Real (indeed, it is the only Reality). Nāgārjuna would surely reject any such assertion as an example of reification.

least – correct. What, then, might be said about *nirvāṇa* from a Madhyamaka viewpoint? Siderits and Katsura read Nāgārjuna as wrestling with whether *nirvāṇa* might be an existent (viz. a positive being, or *bhāva*), a nonexistent (viz. a negative being, *abhāva*), both, or neither (2013: 292). The conclusion reached at the end of the 25th chapter of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* is that *nirvāṇa* cannot possibly be any of these things: Nāgārjuna explicitly equates *nirvāṇa* to *saṃsāra* at MMK 25.19 and then goes on to refute the notion that even *nirvāṇa* can exist ultimately! At this point, it is sufficient to say that the support for his thesis that Bhattacharya expects from Madhyamaka philosophy looks to be at risk from the very outset.¹¹⁵

Another interesting caveat that provides some illumination into Śāṅkara's attitudes to first, other doctrines, and second, matters of history is that he appears to conflate two Sarvāstivādin schools and criticise them as one entity. As we know, there can be significant doctrinal and practical differences between sects that are ostensibly subsumed under the same school of thought: Śāṅkara himself has stark doctrinal differences from the other Vedāntin schools! Nevertheless, in an attitude that Whaling opines is 'typical of his indifference to history' (1979: 6), Śāṅkara conflates the doctrines of the Sautrāntikas and the Vaibhāṣikas. I will spend a little time illustrating how this is the case because I think that it sheds some light on two things:

¹¹⁵ Added to which, Śāṅkara seems to classify the Mādhyamikas as 'nihilists' (Śāṅkara, 2011: 401); a familiar charge against the school that persists to this day. This is odd if, as Bhattacharya suggests when he cites K. Venkata Ramanan, both the Mādhyamikas and Śāṅkara are in agreement regarding the *ātman-Brahman*:

...one can say that the one accepts or denies the ātman as much as the other; both [the Mādhyamika and the Advaita Vedānta] deny ātman as a separate substantial entity inhabiting the body of each individual, and both accept ātman in the sense of the essential nature, the svarūpa or the svabhāva, of the individual as well as of all things. (2015: 114, note 249)

first, on Śaṅkara's apparent ignorance regarding the intricacies of Buddhist doctrine, and so his ignorance of the Buddhist path to liberation. Second, on the diversity of opinion in early Buddhism as to how liberation might be reached and by extension, as to what constituted an accurate portrayal of the Buddha's teachings. Both of these factors interrelate with my investigation into Bhattacharya's reading of both the *Upaniṣads* (and thus Advaita) and early Buddhism. Given that Śaṅkara was at least partly concerned with refuting contemporary schools of Buddhism (in what seems to have been a successful attempt to consolidate Advaita in India), we might think ourselves justified in assuming that he was indeed aware of (at least some of) the doctrinal differences between the rival schools that he was attacking. That Śaṅkara was at least superficially aware of some differences (viz. that he was aware that there were fundamental differences between the three schools he attacks) is made clear in *Vedānta Sūtra* 2.II.32 (Śaṅkara, 2011: 428). Here, he writes that the 'Buddha by propounding the three mutually contradictory systems. . . [has made it clear] that he was a man given to make incoherent assertions.'¹¹⁶ From this I find it relatively unproblematic to suggest that Śaṅkara *was indeed* aware – at the very least – of the basic differences in doctrine between different Buddhist schools. This in mind, I suggest that he either really believed that the Buddha was the confused, single source of all of these schools and their apparently divergent incompatible doctrines, or that he glossed over these differences in a deliberate attempt to lump together – and so dismiss together – the various Buddhist traditions.

¹¹⁶ An extended version of this quotation adds that if the Buddha is not deluded and confused, then a 'hatred of all beings induced him to propound absurd doctrines by accepting which they would become thoroughly confused' (1890: 428). The 'three mutually contradictory systems' referred to are the respective schools of the Vaibhāṣikas, Sautrāntikas, and Mādhyamikas.

Whaling briefly surveys the rest of Śaṅkara's objections to Buddhism and outlines them as follows: Śaṅkara argues against the twelve links (*nidānas*) of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) on the very simple basis that each *nidāna* is sufficient only to explain the cause of the succeeding *nidāna* and not to explain the causal chain as a whole (Whaling, 1979: 4-5). There is rejection of the Buddhist doctrine of momentariness based on the idea that each momentary particle's action would stop prior to the rise of the next particle, thus leaving no link between cause and effect (1979: 5). This leads to an attack on the Buddhist idea that unconditioned (*asaṃskṛta*) *dharma*s are non-momentary and are thus eternal.¹¹⁷ Śaṅkara saw a tension insofar as 'there is a self-contradiction in the Bauddha statements regarding all the three kinds of negative entities, it being said, on the one hand, that they are not positively definable, and, on the other hand, that they are eternal' (1890: 413). Whaling then gives a brief account of Śaṅkara's attack against the Buddhist argument from similarity, which is, he points out, an original argument not found in prior Advaitin literature (1979: 5). This argument is relatively simple and hinges on the supposition that if there is no enduring subject that is able to mentally grasp two similar things, then recognition cannot be based on similarity. Again, the reasoning is simple: Śaṅkara thinks that if a mind is also subject to momentariness (as it presumably must be according to Buddhist doctrine), then it necessarily cannot endure. If the same mind does not endure, then each thing grasped is done so by what is effectively a *different* mind. From this

¹¹⁷ These *asaṃskṛta dharma*s are space (*ākāśa*), cessation through discernment (*pratisaṃkhyānirodha*), and what Whaling calls 'cessation through the absence of a productive cause', but might be better rendered as something like 'cessation without discernment' or 'cessation not dependent upon discernment' (*apratisaṃkhyānirodha*) (1979: 5). Thibaut translates *apratisaṃkhyānirodha* as 'cessation not dependent on such an act', where the 'act' referred to is a 'sublative act of the mind', viz. discernment (Śaṅkara, 2011: 410).

premise, Śaṅkara argues that if the Buddhist were to admit ‘that there is one mind grasping the similarity of two successive momentary existences, he would thereby admit that one entity endures for two moments and thus contradict the tenet of universal momentariness’ (Śaṅkara, 2011: 414). Further, Śaṅkara argues that the act of saying ‘this is similar to that’ demarcates two distinct existent things, viz. two separate cognitions that are then linked by a ‘judgment of similarity’ (2011: 414). He continues ‘[i]f the mental act of which similarity is the object were an altogether new act (not concerned with the two separate similar entities), the expression “this is similar to that” would be devoid of meaning’, which is to say that insofar as we recognise ‘this’ as similar to ‘that’, we must also recognise that this judgement of similarity is predicated on two existent things separated temporally. The recognition (as similar objects) of these existents depends on their separation both temporally and conceptually, and for Śaṅkara, this in turn has to at least partly rely on a permanence not admitted by the Buddhists.

In terms of the *ātman*, Śaṅkara argues that we do not rely on a notion of similarity, but that we are instead directly conscious of it ‘being that which we were formerly conscious of, not of it being merely similar to that’ and that ‘the conscious subject never has any doubt whether it is itself or only similar to itself; it rather is distinctly conscious that it is one and the same subject which yesterday had a certain sensation and to-day remembers that sensation’ (1890: 415). This is, to Śaṅkara’s mind, the single most effective argument against the Mādhyamikas, and is, to my knowledge, the only direct attack he makes against them.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ One might be tempted to ask whether, if the empirical world is illusory (as it is according to the Advaitin *māyāvāda*), then is it not possible that the conscious subject is somehow deluded in its thinking of itself as

In what follows, I will discuss some apparent points of doctrinal divergence between the three Buddhist schools mentioned by Śāṅkara. This will serve a dual purpose – first, it will, I hope, illustrate why Śāṅkara thought these schools so different from his own (viz. because they deny ultimate entities such as the *ātman*). Second, I hope that in so doing it will become clear why Bhattacharya’s thesis regarding the Mahāyāna and the endorsement of an Absolute that creates and underpins reality should fail. I will then detail why I think Yogācāra Buddhism should reject any suggestion of an ultimately existent *ātman-Brahman* by discussing Vasubandhu’s own philosophy. My final position will see the claim staked that whilst absolutism might be one possible outcome for a Yogācārin (indeed, such variations exist), it need not be the default Yogācāra position. This claim would, I think, be shared by Śāṅkara, who we have seen berate Buddhist philosophy in contrast to his own.

4.1 The Vaibhāṣika Account of Possession

Now to the details. A significant point of departure between the two of the three Buddhist schools mentioned by Śāṅkara is the ‘doctrine of possession’. When discussing Vasubandhu’s account of the Vaibhāṣika doctrine of possession in his *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (AKBh), Collett Cox writes that

[p]ossession is used here with regard to the first moment in which a factor is attained; accompaniment refers to one's state of being endowed with that factor, or being endowed with the acquisition

permanent in much the same way that it is deluded in thinking of anything in the outside world as real and permanent? I suspect that this idea occurred to Śāṅkara, and that he likely thought two things. First, that the conscious subject (*ātman*) knows itself more intuitively, immediately and intimately than it is possible for it to know anything external to it, and second, that the argument to the contrary is perilously close to that of the Buddhists: they would argue that the very idea of the *ātman* is simply a mistaken reification. Despite criticisms attesting to his ‘crypto-Buddhism’, it is clear (as shown above) that Śāṅkara at least regarded his own philosophy as distinct from that of the Buddhist schools.

of that factor, in the second and subsequent moments until it is discarded.

(1995: 82)

That there is an idea of ‘one’s state of being endowed’ with something is subtly problematic for the Buddhist that wants to refute the idea of an enduring subject. On this, Conze writes ‘[t]he term *prāpti* [acquisition; obtaining] obviously sails very near the concept of a “person” or “self”. “Possession” is a relation which keeps together the elements of one stream of thought, or which binds a *dharma* to one “stream of consciousness”, which is just an evasive term for an underlying “person”’ (1983: 141). In other words, if there is an underlying entity or reality that is capable of ‘acquisition’ and ‘possession’, then this would seem to have the undesirable consequence of affirming some sort of enduring ‘I’ or *ātman*. Conze elaborates when he says that ‘possession’ must imply ‘a support which is more than the momentary state from moment to moment, and [is] in fact a kind of lasting personality, i.e. the stream as identical with itself, in a personal identity, which is here interpreted as “continuity”’ (1983: 141). The Vaibhāṣikas believe that possession and its opposite, non-possession, must be discrete *dharma*s (and so existent as immutable factors across the three times) that are detached from thought in order to successfully account for the abandonment of defilements (and thus liberation). Cox helpfully contextualises why this needs to be the case when she writes that according to Vaibhāṣika ontology, ‘[d]efilements, like all factors, exist as real entities in the three time periods but manifest their activity of defiling only in the present’ (1995: 89).¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Of course, as ‘real entities’, these *dharma*s have *svabhāva*. The Vaibhāṣikas assert that each *dharma* is characterised by this *svabhāva* and that the momentariness of each *dharma* refers to its activity rather than to the

Cox then goes on to give a comprehensive overview of how the process of possession works. According to the Vaibhāṣikas,

[e]ach defilement is said to arise in the present in relation to a particular object-support through certain causes and conditions and to be connected to a given life-stream by a simultaneously arising possession. Even when the present activity of that defilement and its possession cease and become past, they both continue to be connected to that life-stream through subsequent present possessions that arise successively dependent upon that original possession. These successive possessions form a stream of effects of uniform outflow (*niṣyandaphala*) that not only connects a life-stream to that past defilement but also serves as a cause for the arising of the possession of future defilements. Within the life-stream of each individual, these streams of possession connecting one to past defilements continue regardless of whether or not defilements are presently active; the streams can only be interrupted or terminated through religious praxis.

(Cox, 1995: 89-90)

As Cox notes, these defilements exist as entities across all three times (past, present and future) and so because of this they cannot be ‘abandoned’ by simply destroying them. How then can the Vaibhāṣikas remove these defilements to reach a liberated state? The answer comes in the sense of abandoning through separation. This is accomplished by severing the possession of a defilement, and thus nullifying the connection of a given defilement to a given stream (Cox, 1995: 90), and is the reason why the doctrine of possession is so important for the Vaibhāṣikas to begin with: their ontological commitments require it. As defilements exist as real *dharma*s across the three times and are thus permanent and immutable, they cannot be changed or

dharma itself, which is categorically not momentary: it exists permanently across all three times! There is a distinction, then, between a *dharma*’s *svabhāva* and its activity; the *svabhāva* (and thus the *dharma* itself) is permanent, whereas the causal activity of the *dharma* is what is impermanent.

destroyed. Liberation can only be achieved, then, if one manages to sever the connection that the defilements have to the stream. This, Cox continues, happens in two stages. First, there is the cessation of the 'possession of connection' to a given defilement, and this serves as the cause for the arising of the second stage, the 'possession of disconnection' (or the possession of the non-possession of) the defilement in question (1995: 90). The second step is the *pratisaṃkhyānirodha*, or 'cessation through discernment'. La Vallée-Poussin notes that '[t]here are as many *pratisaṃkhyānirodhas* as there are "objects of attachment", past, present or future' (1930: 39), and it is when a practitioner 'is in possession of all; he is perfectly disconnected from all impure things; the universal detachment is his own; he possesses the *Nirvāṇa*, the *Nirvāṇa* of all' (1930: 40). Cox, too, notes that it is possession of all possible *pratisaṃkhyānirodhas* that the Sarvāstivādins equate with *nirvāṇa* (1995: 90).¹²⁰ Note that this is not, then, a transcendental realm or subsumption into an essential principle of the sort defended by Bhattacharya, but instead a case of permanently severing the attachment of defilements to one's stream of consciousness. Instead, it is a meditative process that is designed to help the practitioner see things as they really are, and things really are built of *dharmas*. This brings us back full-circle

¹²⁰ Cox (1995: 91-92) details the means by which this 'change' takes place according to Vaibhāṣika doctrine. She writes that though continuing to exist as discrete dharmas across the three times, the defilements (and their streams) are interrupted by 'counteragents' (and streams of counteragents). These counteragents – and their streams – are sufficient to block the arising of any subsequent defilements, and they do this via the same process of 'possession' and 'non-possession': '[a]s factors dissociated from thought, possessions or non-possession of factors of differing moral qualities can arise simultaneously in one moment of thought. The possession of a particular defilement can arise in the same moment as the counteragent to that defilement, or, strictly speaking, in the same moment as the possession of that counteragent. In this way, the uniform outflow of successive possessions of past and present defilements can be interrupted and the arising of future defilements can be obstructed through the presence of yet other possessions, specifically, the possessions of the counteragents (*pratipakṣa*) to those defilements' (1995: 91-92). This is how the Vaibhāṣikas argue that spiritual progress can be made despite the permanence of dharmas.

regarding Śaṅkara: it is clear to see why he would not endorse such a metaphysics. The Vaibhāṣikas still endorse ultimately real atoms – each with their own independent, self-sufficient natures – that converge and combine in order to account for the world: this is not in accordance with a doctrine of *ātman-Brahman* unless the actual *svabhāva* of all these different *dharmas* is in fact the *ātman-Brahman*. For the Vaibhāṣikas at least, it is clear that this is not the case.

What then, of the Sautrāntika response to this doctrine of possession? The difference, as we will see, is, despite their shared heritage with the Vaibhāṣikas (both ostensibly belong to the Sarvāstivādin school of thought), stark. Vasubandhu rejected the differentiation between a *dharma's svabhāva* and its activity and instead argues that a *dharma's* existence is *constituted* by its activity. Cox (1995: 94) explains that this means that a *dharma* does not exist as a discrete entity across the three times, which in turn means that ‘momentariness refers to the transitoriness of the factor [*dharma*] as a whole’, and presents an ontological principle that ‘implies that only the present moment exists’. The reasons for this are surprisingly straightforward. We have already touched on an objection to the permanence of *dharmas* on the basis that there is no reason why, if a *dharma* is permanent, that it should ever stop being the way that it is, or more pertinently, ever stop being *active* or manifesting its activity. I think that Vasubandhu probably surmised that this provided a stark challenge to the Vaibhāṣika soteriological project that their doctrine of possession could not satisfactorily overcome. Gold (2015: 36) explains that the Vaibhāṣika cannot claim that the conditions necessary for the *dharmas* to be continually active in all three times do not yet exist. This is because the belief that *dharmas* exist across all three times necessarily means that all that has existed in the past, exists

in the present, and will exist in the future, is already necessarily existent. Thus, it should be the case that a *dharma*'s activity is always active.¹²¹

Gold gives the example of an eye: the future conditions that, 'together with an eye, may some day produce a visual sensation, must already exist, to the same degree that the future eye does', meaning that consequently, 'a future eye should be able to see its future visual objects,

¹²¹ While this is true, we have seen via Cox (1995: 90) that the Vaibhāṣika thought that these activities could be blocked by the relevant counteragents: this does not mean that defiling *dharma*s stop existing or stop trying to manifest their activity, only that they are prevented from doing so. Consequently, we might think that this bypasses the problem before it gets started. Nevertheless, there is still a tension here in terms of causality and discrete *dharma*s that exist permanently: if possession and non-possession are discretely existent *dharma*s as upheld by the Vaibhāṣika, then it becomes increasingly difficult to account for their change in circumstances or the changes in circumstance that they facilitate, viz. possession or non-possession should be permanently existent states that continue to manifest circularly (as all the requisite conditions already exist across all times), as according to Vasubandhu's objection.

In other words, if possession and non-possession are both discrete *dharma*s rather than two stages of the same *dharmic* activity, there is some tension in accounting for how, for example, 'possession' arises and attaches itself to the relevant lifestream. One would assume that if possession manifests its activity at all then it always manifests this same activity in the same place both in virtue of its inability to change and in virtue of the conditions required for the activity to manifest at all (being permanently existent across all three times). There is a similar issue with non-possession. To even begin to try and solve this problem, there would presumably need to be a circular possession of possession; possession of possession of possession; possession of possession of possession of possession and so on *ad infinitum*, which is undesirable for numerous reasons, not least because it would greatly overpopulate Vaibhāṣika ontology.

Cox (1995: 86) demonstrates that the Vaibhāṣikas were aware of this issue and so claimed that

[t]hough this would appear to incur the fault of infinite regress, the original possession and the secondary possession of possession function reciprocally; the original possession possesses both the factor and the secondary possession of possession, and the secondary possession of possession, in turn, possesses the original possession.

It strikes me that this solution might bypass the problem of regression, but the problem of explaining how entities that exist (and so manifest their natures permanently) across the past, present and future could possibly change or effect change remains. As I have said, it seems that *dharma*s that have as their nature the action of possession ought to be always possessing or being possessed. If that is the case, then positing them at all is superfluous as they are simply static entities unable to perform any practical, worthwhile role. They are, always have been, and always will be possessed or possessing that which it is within their nature to possess or be possessed by.

because they exist, along with it, as future entities; together, they should then be able to produce the causal result of the contact of eye organ' (2015: 36). To Vasubandhu, this makes little sense, and so as both Gold (2015: 37) and Cox (1995: 94) recognise, he rejected the Vaibhāṣika ontological model and instead advocated a model of a different sort, denying the immutability of *svabhāva* but not denying the presence of it (in conventional terms, at least!). What Vasubandhu *does* reject is the equating of a *dharma's* causal activity and its *svabhāva*, instead arguing that a *dharma's* activity is constituted by its *svalakṣaṇa* (own-characteristic), its causal power or efficacy. It is not the *dharma*s themselves that are basic, it is their *svalakṣaṇa*, and a given *svalakṣaṇa* can only manifest in the present. This obviously removes the focus upon *dharma*s (and so *svabhāva*) existing across three times and means that *dharma*s are conditioned and thus not ultimately existent. Cox (1995: 94) sums it up well when she writes that '[c]ausal interaction then becomes meaningful only as a relation between the present and its immediately preceding moment, and all present arising can be explained only through a stream of contiguous conditioning'.

This stream of conditioning is affected by 'seeds', which, Cox writes, Vasubandhu equates with the five *skandhas*: 'the very mental and material aggregates of which the life-stream consists' (1995: 95). Cox explains that these seeds have the potential to bring about effects inside a lifestream: this is what is known as their 'seed-state'. Given that they are not actualised events but instead potentialities, multiple seed-states can exist in any lifestream.¹²² Seed-states are

¹²² Cox (1995: 95): 'Since this seed-state is a potentiality and not an actualized event manifesting definite qualities, seed-states of any moral quality can coexist in one life-stream.'

conditioned (dependently originated) and momentary, and as such bypass any recourse to ultimately existent *svabhāva*.¹²³

As far as Vasubandhu is concerned, this solves multiple problems with the Vaibhāṣika account. First, it is closer to *pratītyasamutpāda* in that there are no discrete *dharma*s with *svabhāva* posited as existing ultimately outside of dependent origination. Second, it is closer than the Vaibhāṣika model to an account of momentariness that, whilst not strictly a feature of early Buddhism (von Rospatt, 1995: 15-17), can tentatively be traced back to first century CE canonical literature and can likely be assumed to have been a topic of serious discussion among Buddhist circles even earlier than that (1995: 17).¹²⁴ Third, it disposes with the difficulties that manifest because of the belief that all three times exist. Fourth, this account of momentariness

¹²³ Cox (1995: 5) gives a succinct and detailed account of how seed-states operate. I shall reproduce it here:

Like all conditioned factors, these aggregates and their potential capability as seed-states are momentary, and this potentiality is passed along through the contiguous conditioning by which aggregates are produced in each successive moment. Thus, the actualization of a seed's potential at a later time is not the direct result of the original factor or action by which the stream of that seed-state was initially implanted. Rather, the later actualization is conditioned indirectly through the successive reproduction of the efficacy of the original action in each consecutive moment in the form of a seed-state. At a certain moment, when the appropriate causes and conditions coalesce, the seed's potential is actualized.

¹²⁴ Von Rospatt (1995: 18) ultimately concludes that

on the whole the examination of the Nikāyas/Āgamas and of alleged quotations of the Buddha yields little concrete information on the development of the theory of momentariness. Besides the vague possibility that already by the first century B.C. the theory may have been current (possibly even as the teaching of the Buddha), it reveals only that if the theory had existed at all by the time of the final redaction of the canon, then only without acquiring a canonical status – possibly because it would have been confined to certain circles of Buddhists.

and continuity (especially in terms of moral accountability and spiritual progress) is, it seems, designed to function in the absence of a unifying principle or ground of experience. As Cox (1995: 96) puts it, it is designed to ‘account for direct and indirect causal efficacy in the face of momentariness and the absence of a unifying substratum’.¹²⁵ I agree with Gold when he argues that this can be linked convincingly to Vasubandhu’s denial of *ātman*.¹²⁶ Gold’s point is that there is no need for Vasubandhu to ‘posit continuity between past experiences and present memories for the same reason that there is no need to posit a real nonexistent to take up the space when an existent entity passes away’ (2015: 110).¹²⁷

Although each of the reasons given above is significant in their own different way, I am primarily concerned with the first and fourth of these reasons insofar as they interrelate: the denial of ultimate intrinsic natures and unifying principles. Vasubandhu had several reasons to deny the ultimate, immutable existence of *svabhāva*, but paramount among them is his reluctance to veer from doctrinal orthodoxy.

¹²⁵ Of course, Vasubandhu was not always a Yogācārin (and thus not always a Mahāyānist), but the lack of a single unifying substratum is for him – as for Nāgārjuna – a constant. It seems odd that Vasubandhu would expend so much effort denying *svabhāva* and a unified substratum if he intended his philosophy to endorse the existence of the *ātman-Brahman*.

¹²⁶ About which, more will follow (p167-176).

¹²⁷ Vasubandhu specifically thinks that it is nonsensical to infer from the absence of an existent entity a nonexistent cause that brings about the nonperception of that same entity. Such a ‘nonexistent’ is a conceptual construction, a *parikalpita*, brought about by an inference and which cannot cause anything real. Recall that for Vasubandhu, a ‘real’ entity is causally engaged with other entities; mere inference is not sufficient for a causal connection. The destruction of an entity cannot be caused by any other entity because for Vasubandhu, destruction/absence is not a real thing. It is, in fact, a conceptual construction that is imposed on the world when an entity is no longer present: destruction is, as Gold puts it ‘simply the nonexistence of a recently past thing’ (2015: 109).

For a more detailed analysis of this position, see Gold (1995: 107-110).

At *AKBh* 298.21-22, Vasubandhu cites the Buddha:

*svabhāvaḥ sarvadā cāsti bhāvo nityaśca neṣyate /
na ca svabhāvād bhāvo 'nyo vyaktamīśvaraceṣṭitam //*

Intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) exists at all times, [but its] existence is not accepted (*neṣyate*) as eternal (*nitya*) /
Nor is there existence different to intrinsic nature – [this is] clearly stated by the Lord //

Verses like this can be difficult to interpret because they are both frustratingly terse and look on the face of things to be contradictory. Such appearances are typical of Buddhist literature. On the one hand, Vasubandhu appears to be endorsing an immutable *svabhāva* and simultaneously equating it with all existence. More than that, it could even be interpreted that the Buddha (and so Vasubandhu in virtue of the quotation) is claiming that *svabhāva* exists across all three times – just like the Vaibhāṣikas! Yet on the other hand he is clearly stipulating that intrinsic nature be ‘not accepted as eternal’. We have seen how *dharma* theory leaves open the reification of *dharma*s (which ‘are’ their *svabhāva*) as immutable, permanent entities, eternal and uncaused. Vasubandhu is aware of this problem and so denies that *svabhāva* is this immutable thing present across all three times (past, present and future), instead eventually arriving at the doctrine of *trisvabhāva*, or three natures.¹²⁸ How, then, to account for the Buddha’s apparent assertion that *svabhāva* ‘exists at all times’ (*sarvadā*: always, forever)? Gold contends that Vasubandhu holds that the Buddha means not that intrinsic natures exist eternally

¹²⁸ Recall from §2 that according to this theory, entities do not have one immutable, eternal, really existent *svabhāva*; instead, what we usually understand to be *svabhāva* is best understood as three interconnected perspectives.

(as held by the Vaibhāṣikas), but rather that a given entity can have no nature but its intrinsic nature (2015: 38). In other words, for an entity in the world to ‘exist’ (conventionally), it must have a *svabhāva*, but this *svabhāva* is resolutely not eternal. Indeed, Vasubandhu’s later *trīsvabhāva* doctrine states that the second nature of an entity (it can be understood as the second perspective on an entity) is its causal story, that the *svabhāva* commonly understood is actually causally conditioned according to dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) (Gold, 2015: 149). We experience things in such a way, but at the same time, a person with sufficient insight knows that this is an *appearance* and not the truth of the matter. We have not a singular *svabhāva*, but a *svabhāva* that is ‘inherently threefold’ (Gold, 2015: 148). This, of course, negates the Vaibhāṣika understanding of immutable, independent *svabhāvas* – the very fact that the nature of an entity is in three distinct but dependent parts means that the nature is not a unitary, self-sufficient, immutable thing. As Gold notes, the fact that *svabhāva* is now ‘not accepted as eternal’, not thought of as a unitary, self-sufficient thing, means that *svabhāva* must be a mental construction, a *parikalpita* (2015: 148).

We now know why Vasubandhu rejects the doctrine of possession: it relies upon the permanent existence of the three times (past, present, future), and the *dharmas* that provide the mechanics of the theory require intrinsic existence across those three times. It is for these reasons that Nāgārjuna would also reject a doctrine of possession: if there are no *svabhāvas*, then there can be no existence across three times. Nāgārjuna is keen to point out that change is constantly occurring and permanence is an impossibility. We will see more on this in a later section. This being the case, how could a doctrine of possession be endorsed by a Mādhyamika? If there are no *svabhāvic dharmas*, there is nothing to be possessed across time. If the three

times lack *svabhāva*, they too are not simultaneously existent. A Madhyamaka argument against Vaibhāṣika possession, then, is as simple as that. It is not just Nāgārjuna for whom impermanence is of central importance – it appears that Vasubandhu took Nāgārjuna’s arguments on this front very seriously indeed. As we will see in the next section, permanent existence is a problem for Vasubandhu because he thinks that entities can only be ‘real’ (and so can only have any causal efficacy) if they are momentary, have a causal effect, and are immediately cognisable (i.e. knowable). In what follows, I will elaborate on why Vasubandhu thought this way and the extent to which this philosophy precludes belief in permanent unchanging entities such as *svabhāva* and the *ātman-Brahman*.

4.2 Vasubandhu on *Svabhāva*, Change, and Denial of the *Ātman*

For Vasubandhu, then, intrinsic natures might *appear* to be real, but they cannot be ultimately real if we are to account sufficiently for change and thus for the Buddhist soteriological process: they must all be mental constructs.¹²⁹ This must apply, of course, to a universal intrinsic nature such as the transcendent *ātman-Brahman* just as it applies to the personal *ātman* (what Bhattacharya (2015: 5-6) refers to as the *jīva*). Buddhists – including Vasubandhu – would

¹²⁹ On Vasubandhu’s conception of liberation, Trivedi (2005: 234) writes:

To see things as they really are, claims Vasubandhu, is to see them in meditation without the distorting dualistic mentations and imputations of our ordinary consciousness. Instead, they are seen in an ineffable meditative experience as being dependent and always changing, as being part of a flow of things that have no essences or fixed natures or own-beings (*niḥsvabhāva*). This, I suggest, is what Vasubandhu means by the claim that the perfected or fulfilled aspect (*pariṇiṣpannasvabhāva*) of things is their dependent aspect (*paratantrasvabhāva*) without the imagined or constructed aspect (*parikalpitasvabhāva*).

generally make no distinction between '*jīva*' and *ātman* (talk of the *jīva* is in my experience either entirely absent from Buddhist discussions of self, or simply taken to be equivalent with *ātman*), but as we have seen, Bhattacharya contends that the *ātman* – synonymous with *ātman-Brahman* – is the hyper-reality *behind* the *jīva*. This distinction is, I think, largely irrelevant to Vasubandhu's denial of the *ātman* because denial of one ought to necessitate denial of the other. I will first give an account of Vasubandhu's denial of the *ātman* and then assess how useful this denial is in separating his type of Buddhism from the Advaita of Śaṅkara. From there, it should be clear whether Vasubandhu would or indeed could endorse an *ātman-Brahman*.

So far, the defining mark of permanence, of an *ātman*, has been '*svabhāva*'. A permanent, fixed, immutable essence. Nāgārjuna is probably the most famous Buddhist to take issue with the conception of *svabhāva* as a fixed essence, arguing that it precludes change, cannot be found under even the deepest analysis, and is little more than a reified idea that serves only to frustrate the Buddhist soteriological project. The Buddhist aversion to ascribing permanent existence or *ātman*, though, is well attested even in the canonical literature.¹³⁰ It looks as though Vasubandhu took Nāgārjuna's criticisms of *svabhāva* seriously. We know that

¹³⁰ Wynne (2009: 77) dates the first instance of a codified *anātman* doctrine to around the time of the Second Sermon, adding that a "no self" doctrine cannot be taken back to the Buddha, but was of such influence that it came to define the Buddhist mainstream for more than two thousand years.' Wynne agrees with Bhattacharya insofar as they both claim that the Buddha explained only what was *not* self rather than that there *is no* self. However, such distinctions might prove to be toothless. As Thanissaro Bhikkhu writes, '[s]ome writers try to qualify the no-self interpretation by saying that the Buddha denied the existence of an eternal self or a separate self, but this is to give an analytical answer to a question that the Buddha showed should be put aside' (1996). We ought to take the same tack with arguments such as Bhattacharya's. The Buddha thought such questions should be set aside because they are mere distractions, pointless at best and damaging at worst to the soteriology that he was laying out. The point is liberation, and at that point, writes Thanissaro Bhikkhu (1996), 'questions of self, no-self, and not-self fall aside. Once there's the experience of such total freedom, where [or why] would there be any concern about what's experiencing it, or whether or not it's a self?'

he divided the concept up into three distinct but interrelated aspects, the *trisvabhāva*. Far from asserting the ultimate existence of such *svabhāvas*, Vasubandhu is at once accounting for the experiences that deluded minds have of entities whilst also redefining the reified *svabhāva* as something that is necessarily conditioned and constructed. This means that by definition, the *trisvabhāva* could not be ultimately existent, immutable, or eternal.

Indeed, a ‘real’ *svabhāva* of the sort endorsed by the Vaibhāṣikas would, thinks Vasubandhu, necessarily preclude change – a position shared with Nāgārjuna. This should in theory rule out the idea that Vasubandhu’s version of Yogācāra is absolutist, though there is some degree of disagreement on this.¹³¹ Interpreters such as Tola and Dragonetti point to the opening *kārikā* of the *Trisvabhāvakārikā* (also *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*) of Vasubandhu in support of the idea of a transcendent Absolute. They translate *pariṇiṣpanna* as ‘absolute’, citing convention (1983: 234), whereas Trivedi and Williams prefer to translate it as ‘perfected’ (this is also a legitimate

¹³¹ Trivedi (2005: 233) notes that Paul Williams appears to characterise Yogācāra as ‘absolute idealism’. By this, Trivedi means that Williams characterises Yogācāra in such a way that ‘what exists ultimately (and, in some versions of absolute idealism, creates all that exists) is one overarching mentalistic or spiritual thing or principle or force, whether the Absolute or Mind or Brahman’ (2005: 202-233). Williams does indeed appear to support such a view when he writes that ‘in Yogācāra texts emptiness is redefined to mean that the substratum which must exist in order for there to be anything at all is *empty of* subject-object duality’ (2000: 157). However, whilst this does endorse a substratum, it does not necessarily lead us to some endorsement of *ātman-Brahman*, which is fundamentally different to ‘mind’ so considered in Yogācāra. Williams (2000: 157) clarifies his position when he writes that

[w]hat we have to know in order to let go of the grasping which is unenlightenment is that the flow of experiences which we erroneously understand in terms of subjects and objects is actually, finally, all there is. It is therefore empty of those subjects and objects as separate polarised realities. That emptiness, the quality of ‘being empty of’ is the perfected aspect.

What we actually have as substratum then is a flux, the events in which are (conventionally) subject to dependent origination and *karma*. Ultimate reality simply is this flux. It is the basis of our experience, and it is the final analysis of our condition. Williams is quick to point out that this does not make the flux ‘some immutable Absolute’ (2000: 159).

option: see Monier-Williams, 1960: 596). I shall illustrate why how we understand this word influences how we make sense of the concept more generally and of Vasubandhu's project when it comes to talk of *svabhāva*.

In the Sanskrit, we read at *TSK/TSN* 1:

*kalpitaḥ paratantraśca pariniṣpanna eva ca /
trayaḥ svabhāvā dhīrāṇāṃ gambhīrajñeyamiṣyate*

Tola and Dragonetti (1983: 251) render this into English thus:

It is admitted that the three natures, the imaginary, the dependent and the absolute one, are the profound object of the wise men's knowledge.

Talk of an 'absolute nature' sounds perilously close to talking about a real *svabhāva* or a nature that is somehow 'beyond' the world but underpinning it, much like the Advaitin conception of the *ātman-Brahman*. Could this really be what Vasubandhu meant? Trivedi and Williams are perhaps more measured with their translation of *pariniṣpanna* as 'perfected', and this is likely due to their awareness that the word can be understood as 'reality', 'existing' and even 'real being' (Monier-Williams, 1960: 596). These possible translations certainly seems to lend themselves to the concept of a Real nature hidden among those that we mistakenly assume to be 'real' natures. In other words, it leaves open the possibility that Bhattacharya is correct: all entities have a Real nature, and that is the *ātman-Brahman*. We simply look in the wrong places when we mistakenly assume something other than the *ātman-Brahman* to be the ground of all existence or 'real being'. Paul Williams thinks that even for the Yogācārin, '[i]n order for there to be absence of subject-object duality there has actually to exist *something* which is erroneously divided into subjects and objects' (2000: 158). He goes further, writing that in the Yogācāra, 'it

is very much not the case that there is universal absence of own-existence (*svabhāva*)’ (2000: 158). In other words, Yogācārins endorse the existence of *svabhāva* – potentially of the same sort as the *ātman-Brahman* – as the hyper-reality or ground that we bifurcate because of our deluded thought process and deluded engagements with concepts. This is ostensibly true for *some* Yogācārins (there is, like any Buddhist school, divergence over technicalities and details!), but I do not think it is the case for Vasubandhu, as I will demonstrate.

What exactly did Vasubandhu mean? Williams disagrees with both Gold and Trivedi in his discussion of the absolute or perfected aspect (perfected nature, absolute nature; *pariṇiṣpannasvabhāva*) insofar as he concludes that this perfected aspect does not imply the nonexistence of *svabhāva*. Instead, he argues that the emptiness (*śūnyatā*) referred to in Yogācāra is ‘redefined to mean that the substratum which must exist in order for there to be anything at all is empty of subject-object duality’ (2000: 157). There is still emptiness; it is just not used in the same way that Nāgārjuna used it. It is worth noting, however, that Nāgārjuna certainly thought that emptiness understood as the lack of *svabhāva* necessitated a lack of subject-object duality. Indeed, McCagney writes that for Nāgārjuna, ‘[t]he term “*śūnyatā*” functions by pointing to the incoherence of assuming that events are determinate or definable’ (1997:95). Thus, McCagney (1997: 93) opines that events and entities are beyond categorisations of ‘existence’ ‘not because they have *svabhāva*, independent eternal existence or nonexistence, but because they are *niḥsvabhāva*, open-ended (*śūnya*) and indeterminate (*animitta*). Therefore they can occur.’ This is to say that a diligent Mādhyamika ought not to commit to either position: I ought not to affirm my laptop’s existence, but nor should I affirm its nonexistence. Getting tangled up in either concept is the trap into which people generally fall, and this trap only

compounds our dissatisfaction. ‘Existence’ is used in a nuanced way: my laptop exists *conventionally*, a designation that illustrates the product of innumerable causes and conditions that have combined in various ways to produce that on which I type. My laptop does not exist *ultimately*, by or with *svabhāva*; it does not enjoy a privileged status according to which it has an immutable, supra-mundane nature. It does not have a permanent, eternal identity. This is what it means to be ‘ultimate’ in the Buddhist literature succeeding the Abhidharma.

Whilst the distinction between *śūnyatā* in a Madhyamaka context and *śūnyatā* in a Yogācāra context can be forced in the above manner, then, it strikes me that they need not necessarily be considered as fundamentally different in scope or result. Taking away the ontological aspect for a moment, both aim at the epistemological realisation that there are no immutable, eternal entities. There is of course disagreement regarding the scope of *śūnyatā* in terms of ontology. I am not at all convinced that Nāgārjuna is actually concerned with providing a metaphysic of ontology for reasons that will become clear as we progress. He certainly appears to be concerned with removing other people’s ontological positions, but he does so with a specific goal in mind. It is uncontroversial to say that Nāgārjuna is mainly concerned with providing an account of the means to liberation; this is the *raison d’être* of all Buddhist praxis and of all the Buddhist philosophy that aims to make some sort of sense of this praxis. This account of liberation from dissatisfaction (*duḥkha*) mainly focusses on how we understand and interact with the world. People impose ontological views and these views then corrupt or detract from their soteriological aim. Nāgārjuna wants to recapture this central objective. He thus reduces ontological claims down to absurdities, as in the case of *svabhāva* (and, I think by extension, *dharma*s as characterised by Ābhidharmikas). But this is not to say that he *replaces* these

ontological principles with *śūnyatā*. *Śūnyatā* looks to me to function as a tool of understanding, namely of understanding change and causality with the terminal aim of explaining how we might change from deluded to awakened. What it does not look to be – though it has been taken as such by several subsequent Buddhist schools – is some sort of substantial substratum or Absolute. This would be the most egregious of reifications and an affront to Nāgārjuna's entire project. In other words, use of *śūnyatā* strikes me primarily as an epistemic endeavour. This would certainly be in keeping with the Buddha's famed reluctance to answer what he saw as irrelevant metaphysical questions; ruminating on the ontological makeup of the world would for Nāgārjuna be as pointless and distracting as it was for the Buddha. Consequently, we should focus on our understanding of the key principles of liberation, none of which involve speculation about a ground or Absolute principle in the vein of the *ātman-Brahman*.

Despite the apparent disregard by Nāgārjuna for any sort of grounding principle, I do not think that he wants to claim that entities do not 'exist' conventionally, for we engage with things all of the time, and he recognises that we must navigate this world of objects. Nor is it to say that events do not occur conventionally, for we experience them all of the time. Instead, we can see that Nāgārjuna wants to say that they do not enjoy a privileged existence; they are not endowed with *svabhāva*. They are not *ultimately* existent. King points out that for Nāgārjuna, there is no possibility of substantial existence (*dravya sat*), and all *dharma*s are, therefore nominal (*prajñapti sat*) (1995: 120). There are, then, no substantial entities – how could there be a substantial *ātman-Brahman*? There is a caveat in terms of Yogācāra, however. The Yogācārins claim that consciousness (translated by Lusthaus as *vijñapti*, synonymous with *citta*) is a *dravya* – it is a real thing. Lusthaus writes that to be real in a Yogācārin sense is to be

momentary, causally efficacious, and able to be cognised (2002: 453). Such a thing is still *samvṛti*. The idea at play here is that whilst consciousness does not enjoy a privileged existence (and so whilst ‘real’, it is not ‘ultimately real’), it ought not to be rejected as nonexistent (Lusthaus, 2002: 462).

There is some concern in the Yogācārin texts that a Madhyamaka approach might unwittingly fall foul of this problem. Mādhyamikas do indeed tend to negate *everything*. They would have no problem in arguing ‘neither consciousness nor not consciousness’, for example, placing the role of what Yogācārins consider to be the primary means by which we analyse our existence in some sort of existential limbo.¹³² For the Yogācārins, this is a problem precisely because to deny consciousness, or to remain ambiguous about consciousness, is to deny *everything*. Lusthaus (2002: 463) elaborates:

Without some acceptance of the facticity which is never anything or anywhere other than consciousness, nothing whatsoever can be affirmed or denied, nothing can be known or understood. Knowability, by definition, requires consciousness, i.e., an amenability to awareness. Without some basis for knowledge, not a single determination can be made about the form or content of one’s experience.

Consciousness is then a ground of sorts – it grounds our knowledge of the world insofar as it allows both experience of and reflection upon objects, events and so on. A ground of this sort, though, is not quite equivalent to a ground of the sort that Bhattacharya concludes that Mahāyānists endorse. It is not a ground of *all* being. It is not the material and efficient cause of

¹³² I think that this concern is somewhat misplaced in the wider scheme of things. In negating or ‘denying’ consciousness, all a Mādhyamika is really doing is denying its ultimate ontological status one way or the other.

existence as *Brahman* is purported to be. Nor is consciousness a fundamental Absolute: Vasubandhu acknowledges other minds without supposing that they all share the same causal nexus, viz. as microcosms of the *ātman-Brahman*. In order to avoid the charge of solipsism, the Yogācārins need to account for more than one mind. Lusthaus (2002: 489) demonstrates that Yogācāra necessitates multiple consciousnesses, arguing that such intersubjectivity is essential to the Yogācāra account of the world:

Yogācāra does not advocate solipsism. Consciousness is intersubjective; karma is communal as well as personal. Therefore, the existence of other minds is affirmed. . . Not only is no attempt made to reduce 'other minds' to mere projections of one's own, but the very core of Buddhism – the teaching of Dharma by one sentient being to another – is made absolutely contingent on there being consciousnesses external to and yet perceptible by other consciousnesses. In other words, *the entire point of Yogācāra phenomenology rests on both the necessity and possibility that there be communication between distinct minds.*

Thus the final realisation, insofar as there is one, looks to me to be identical in the case of both Madhyamaka and Yogācāra: there are no immutable, intrinsic natures. For Nāgārjuna, the realisation of *śūnyatā* provides this insight. For Vasubandhu, the realisation of the perfected aspect provides this insight. In both cases, there is a common factor: the insight remains the same.

This truth is to be realised in meditation, a feature that Nāgārjuna's use of *śūnyatā* appears to share with the Yogācārins.¹³³ The Yogācāra of Vasubandhu thus shares a couple of

¹³³ Williams writes that '[t]hat emptiness, that very absence itself, is the perfected aspect, and it has to be known directly on the deepest possible level, in meditation' (2000: 158).

important features with Madhyamaka. *Śūnyatā* still necessitates a lack of *svabhāva*, and this truth is to be realised in meditation. Both appear to disregard any sort of substantial substratum existing through the past, present and future, although it can certainly be argued that Nāgārjuna's means of doing so is more thoroughgoing than that of Vasubandhu. We have seen that Nāgārjuna categorically rejects any substance at all, equating substantial existence with possession of *svabhāva*. But what of Vasubandhu? Is not Yogācāra concerned with *mind-only*, and this being the case, is the mind a substance? Williams writes that the 'mind' is the primary substratum for Yogācāra; it 'is the one primary existent that serves as the substratum for everything else' (2000: 160). This phraseology is awkward, for my own previous talk of substrata has been in relation to supra-mundane, immutable Absolutes. It is true that for Yogācārins – including Vasubandhu – the mind is the primary consideration. This does not, however, mean that the mind is some sort of ultimate reality or basic cosmic principle.

Lusthaus writes that the 'real' for a Yogācārin is *saṃvṛti* (conventional) and not *paramārtha* (ultimate) (2002: 453), which sheds some light on Williams' contention. Though the mind is that with which the Yogācārins are concerned, and though it is the lens through which all experience must be analysed, it is *not* an Absolute. If it were, it would be thought of in terms of the ultimate; as *paramārtha*. This is precisely how Bhattacharya, Murti et al. think of the *ātman-Brahman* and *śūnyatā*. We have seen above that *śūnyatā* cannot be equated with the *ātman-Brahman*. There is again a caveat – whilst the mind/consciousness is not a substantial absolute, there are for Vasubandhu some substantial entities: this is a marked point of departure from Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka. Gold writes that for Vasubandhu, it is present entities and *only* present entities that exist substantially (2015: 40). It is tempting to think that this opens up a

route for the possibility of an *ātman-Brahman*, but we have already seen that the *ātman-Brahman* is thought of as eternal, unchanging and so on. It is not clear to me that we could recharacterise a sort of radically momentary, radically present *ātman-Brahman* because such a characterisation necessitates – as Vasubandhu is at pains to point out – a chain of causal efficacy. An entity is only substantial insofar as it is present (present phenomena can only be momentary) and insofar as it has causal efficacy. Gold explains in the concluding remarks to *Paving the Great Way* that for Vasubandhu, a self (*ātman*) cannot be substantially real because ‘[f]rom a causal point of view, there is no agent and no experiencer who plays an indispensable role in the causal story of the aggregated elements that make up the apparent self’ (2015: 216). In other words, the personal ‘self’ so construed in Hindu literature (what Bhattacharya refers to as the *jīva*) is a reification precisely because it has no bearing on the causal account of experience. The *skandhas* account for experience perfectly well, and so positing a ‘self’ serves no verifiable purpose. The causal story remains intact without the *ātman*.

But what about a transcendent *ātman-Brahman*? Bhattacharya – as we have seen – was clear in his assertion that whilst the Buddha rejects the reality of a *jīva*, he does not reject the reality of the *ātman-Brahman*. Further, recall that he contends that the Mahāyāna schools were the ones to remedy this oversight by actively endorsing a doctrine of *ātman-Brahman*. This does not seem like an avenue that is open to Bhattacharya in relation to Vasubandhu’s version of Yogācāra. According to Vasubandhu, something real (and substantial) requires a causal story. Further to this, it is required to have some causally efficacious role *in* that causal story. The *ātman-Brahman* satisfies these criteria. Recall that for the Advaitins, it is both the material and efficient cause of the world, and so everything that exists is really *Brahman*. At this point, we

need not be too concerned with the intricacies of accounting for causality within a substance that is ultimately without attributes and immutable (such a discussion could fill a book of its own!), we need only acknowledge that Advaitins do believe that *Brahman* is the cause of and support of the world. Also recall that *Brahman* is thought of as eternal and unchanging. It is its eternality and immutability that precludes the *ātman-Brahman* from being real and substantial according to Vasubandhu's formulations: an eternal substance cannot be momentary in the true meaning of the word. The best we could say would be that the eternal *ātman-Brahman* somehow manifests objects/events momentarily, but this still leaves open two problems. First, the *ātman-Brahman* itself is still eternal, and so unreal. Second, the *ātman-Brahman* does not on this account have the ability to effect change in a temporal causal series. This is simply because an eternal *ātman-Brahman* could not change, and acting to bring about change necessitates some change in the state of the thing doing the act.¹³⁴ Of course, we know that for Śaṅkara and the Advaitins, 'there is no object that enjoys a separate ontological existence and nature from *brahman*' (Rambachan, 2006: 88). But for Vasubandhu, we have seen that there is no way that an eternal *ātman-Brahman* could really exist: talk of eternality and so on would make the *Brahman* some static thing, not acting, not causing and not responsible for anything. Whilst this might accord with the Advaitin *neti neti* approach, it does nothing to account for a world that the

¹³⁴ This is a mundane point. If I want to do something, there are several changes in 'state'. First, I must decide to do something, which is a change in my mental state. Then I must act, which changes my physical state; I need to get up and go into the kitchen if I want to make a cup of tea. Then there are results, which might again change both of these states in some way. We can see that the act of effecting change also necessitates some degree of change – no matter how minor – in the thing doing the acting. Śaṅkara denies this in relation to the *Brahman*, using the doctrine of *māyā* to explain away how the *Brahman* only *appears* to act. This is deeply unsatisfying and is, to my mind, not satisfactorily explained by any Advaitin literature.

Advaitins still want to claim *is Brahman*. More to the point, by Vasubandhu's criteria, the *Brahman* simply cannot exist. *Brahman* does not act, is eternal and yet somehow created the world. None of this tallies with Vasubandhu's account of a real entity, which, as we know, is to be causally efficacious, cognisable and momentary. To be causally efficacious takes on an added dimension in terms of Vasubandhu's philosophy. It is not enough to cause some effect; the entity must itself be a momentary effect of a prior, past cause. Causal efficacy is reliant on a chain, the chain of *pratītyasamutpāda*, which has no discernible beginning. The *Brahman* is by definition uncaused. It cannot be part of this causal chain, just as it cannot be truly momentary in the sense that it is caused, manifests, passes. It seems clear to me then that no Yogācārin following Vasubandhu's lead ought to endorse the *ātman-Brahman* as the immutable ground of all existence. To do so is to surely miss the point, and so I think that Bhattacharya's thesis that Mahāyānists believe in an equivalent to the *ātman-Brahman* fails if that Mahāyānist is a Yogācārin (or at least a Yogācārin in the tradition of Vasubandhu). This demonstrates that it is not necessarily the case that the Mahāyāna directs practitioners toward an *ātman-Brahman*.

4.3 *Brahman*, Action, and *Māyā*

Bhattacharya, we saw earlier, writes that *Brahman* 'is what makes us act (*kārayitr*), but it does not itself act (*akartr*)' (2015: 29). Such language is typical of Advaitin literature and typical of the *Upaniṣads*. Bearing in mind what has been said above, Vasubandhu's retort is simple enough – how can that which does not change cause something else to change? I previously wrote that every act requires a change in the agent, be it mental or physiological. Is it the case that the *ātman-Brahman* can somehow cause actions without itself acting? Would not an action require some sort of motive? Is *Brahman* just so radically other to us that it can cause acts

without acting, without motive, and we are simply unable to understand how? This is not a defence offered by Śaṅkara, nor is it a defence offered by Bhattacharya. It is deeply dissatisfying to claim that a cause of an effect does not itself have a cause: this is the Buddhist account of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). For the Buddhists, it is a matter of experience and analysis that every cause has a myriad of causes and conditions behind it; never at any time can we discern there to be a single start point of causes. There is instead an infinite web of innumerable causes and conditions interacting to bring about all psycho-physical phenomena. How then can the Advaitin be justified in claiming that the *ātman-Brahman*, that which does not act but causes action is responsible for the world? How can *Brahman* create if it is eternal and unaffected by motives? Fost cites Bādarāyana's account of creative action, claiming that *Brahman* 'is moved not by need or necessity but rather by a free, spontaneous, and joyous creativity, a release of energy for its own sake' (1998: 393), which relays the stock Advaitin response, but does not get us any closer to an adequate explanation. According to this account, *Brahman* is still *moved by a motive*; it is simply that the motive is playfulness. On this, Fost writes that 'notion of "sport" or "play" (*līlā*) represents a third sort of activity, one that is neither purposive nor purposeless' (1998: 393). I understand that play might be said to be 'mindless' insofar as we can engage in it in an uncritical, unthinking way, but I think that to claim that play is 'neither purposive or purposeless' is somewhat mistaken. Play might not have a purpose outside of itself, that is to say that play can be done for its own sake and so on. But there is still a *motivation* to play, even if that motivation is simply to play for playing's sake. *Brahman* cannot be motivated. Indeed, *Brahman* cannot be affected by *anything*. Consequently, we are left in

the dark as to why there is anything at all. For this reason, I find neither Bādarāyana nor Fost's account particularly satisfying.

Buried in all of this wrangling is a significant point: if *Brahman* creates according to mere sport or playfulness, the *Brahman* has still acted. Fost responds to this by arguing that the explanation of playfulness is not meant to be taken literally as an ultimate account of *Brahman*. I have written elsewhere that for the Advaitin, nothing at all can be predicated of *Brahman* on an ultimate level. Instead, Fost writes, we should understand *līlā* only on the conventional level, as a helpful but ultimately sublatale designation (1998: 396). He then equates *līlā* with *māyā*, writing that '[t]he metaphysical category is *māyā* not *līlā*, which is used only as a metaphor to defend the absolute freedom of *Brahman*' (1998: 396). *Māyā* is another tricky topic for the Advaitins. Translated literally, it means 'illusion' or 'magic', and the Advaitins generally consider it to be the cosmic force that obfuscates the *Brahman* in the eyes of the unenlightened. As *Brahman* is everything (and indeed everything is *Brahman*), *māyā* must be an aspect of *Brahman*. The Advaitin position is that *māyā* is a veil of ignorance (*avidyā*) that conceals our true nature, the *ātman-Brahman*. The precise nature of *māyā* and its relation to the *Brahman* is not developed in any detail by Śaṅkara. There are the usual metaphors of ropes mistaken for snakes until knowledge sublates the misapprehension of reality and defeats the delusion, as it were, but this does not go far enough. It simply tells us how we might operate *within māyā*, not how *māyā* came to be a thing in the first place. Śaṅkara also talks about *māyā* as an illusion performed by a magician: it affects the audience, but not the performer. Fost cites Śaṅkara thus:

One of the favorite analogies used by Advaitins to depict the world of *māyā* is that of the magician and his deceptive ploys. Just as a

magician, who with his conjuring tricks "plays" with our perceptual faculties in order to create the illusion that something has come from nothing or that one thing has changed into another, so Brahman by his mysterious, creative power deludes us into believing that the phenomenal world is real. Śaṅkara writes: "As the magician is not at any time affected by the magical effect produced by himself, because it is unreal, so the highest Self is not affected by the world-[effects (or appearances)].

Again, we have an explanation – plausible or not – of how *māyā* might manifest as part of *Brahman* without actually affecting *Brahman*, but we are again left with a question of agency. A magician *chooses* to perform an illusion, cast a spell, and ‘play with our perceptual faculties’, does the *Brahman*? The answer needs to be a resounding ‘no’, and so the metaphor is unsatisfying. I expect that the response from an Advaitin would very likely be that the metaphor is not meant to give a literal account of the relationship between *Brahman*, *māyā*, and the *jīva*. All of this stuff is, after all, ultimately beyond linguistic designation. *Brahman* is beyond agency, beyond attributes, beyond everything. Nevertheless, there seems to be no causal explanation for our delusion and the apparently random obfuscation of the *ātman-Brahman* even on the conventional, worldly level. This has to be a source of some dissatisfaction even for an Advaitin. In contrast, a Buddhist account of delusion has at its core a causal chain to account for how we get to this point of delusion and *avidyā*. We reify because we mistake the causal interactions of *skandhas* and the causal interactions of all other psycho-physical phenomena as indicative of intrinsic existence. This mistake means that we think of the world around us as immutable and independent rather than mutable and dependent – we then reify both the existence of the ‘I’ and the existence of day-to-day entities and invest into them all sorts of meanings and feelings, cultivating different levels of attachment and resulting in different levels of dissatisfaction.

The primary cause of this dissatisfaction is, famously, the ‘self’ (*ātman*). The Advaitin account, or so it seems to me, has no such causal account by which to explain how or why we – being identical to the *ātman-Brahman* – confuse or mistake both the world and ourselves. Where one is offered, it is incomplete and dissatisfying, having recourse to metaphors that do not quite address the real questions and taking as a given the existence of a *Brahman* from which *māyā* has shrouded us, and about which we are perennially confused. *Māyā* is itself a mystery, its existence appearing to be taken on faith. *Māyā* is, as Lusthaus says, ‘an inexplicable cosmic flaw’ (2002: 484). We have the assertion of *Brahman* as a basic substantial ground of everything, and we have *māyā* inexplicably clouding our self-knowledge (which is in the final analysis equivalent to obscuring our knowledge of the *Brahman*). This is a clear point of departure between Advaita and Buddhism. How can Buddhist schools that conceive of the world in the ways in which I have outlined above be said to endorse or believe that there is a transcendent *ātman-Brahman* as put forth by Śaṅkara? It is my contention that if they take seriously *pratītyasamutpāda*, reason, and analysis, they simply cannot.

4.4 Yogācāra Idealism?

Finally, can the argument be made that Yogācāra as a type of idealism necessitates that there is only one consciousness, of which we are all parts or manifestations? If this is the case, then Yogācāra would indeed be a Mahāyāna school which endorses a permanent, immutable, single substance akin to the *ātman-Brahman*. This would, of course, mean that Bhattacharya would be right – at least in part! Recall that Bhattacharya cited the *Mahāyāna-Sūtrālaṃkāra* to illustrate that Asaṅga equates emptiness and impersonality with the *ātman-Brahman* (2015: 2) – I offered some arguments against Bhattacharya’s specific interpretations in §1; I also advanced

my own alternative understanding of the passage in question based upon Vasubandhu's wider philosophical method, and so I will not rehash those same arguments here. It is important to note, however, that in some contexts, Yogācāra is indeed interpreted as endorsing a non-dual substance like the *ātman-Brahman*.

Dan Lusthaus has much to say on the question of idealism as applied to Yogācāra. The general thrust of the arguments presented throughout Lusthaus' *Buddhist Phenomenology* is that 'idealism' is an inappropriate term to apply to Yogācāra. This is because for Lusthaus, despite the name Yogācāra strictly meaning 'mind-only' or 'consciousness-only', no one form of idealism really captures the Yogācārin project. To this end, he outlines (and rejects) three main sorts of idealism, which I now give (Lusthaus, 2002: 5):¹³⁵

- 1) The mind or some supermental, non-material entity or force creates all that exists. This is *metaphysical idealism*.
- 2) The ultimate ground of all that is or can be conceived is the cognizing subject, such that the subjective self is the one epistemological nonreducible factor. This is a different form of metaphysical idealism, closer to *epistemological idealism*.
- 3) *Critical epistemological idealism*, as opposed to metaphysical idealism, need not insist on metaphysical or ontological implications, but merely claims that the cognizer shapes his/her

¹³⁵ Lusthaus is at odds with Trivedi (2005: 232), who think that Yogācāra might best thought of as a type of epistemic idealism:

Epistemic idealism, in contrast, makes not an ontological claim but rather the claim that we know things not as they really are, as claim epistemic realists, but rather as they are given to us by our ideas, our concepts, and categories. . .a metaphysically agnostic reluctance to make ontological pronouncements, combined with something like epistemic idealism, just might be Vasubandhu's position if he doubts not external objects themselves but externality, that is if he doubts not external objects but instead whether our ordinary consciousness can say anything about objects outside its acts of cognizing them.

experience to such an extent that s/he will never be able to extricate what s/he brings to an experience from what is other to the cognizer. Like can only know like, so what is truly other is essentially and decisively unknowable precisely because it is other, foreign, alien, inscrutable.

It is the first of these with which I am most concerned: 'metaphysical idealism'. This sounds, on the face of things, very close to what Bhattacharya et al. propose when they argue that Mahāyāna Buddhism necessarily entails an *ātman-Brahman*. On Lusthaus' definition, the 'non-material entity or force [which] creates all that exists' would simply be the *ātman-Brahman*. That which we understand to be our consciousness would be no more than a microcosmic instantiation of this *ātman-Brahman*, somehow deluded into thinking that we are other than it. Reality would be one single consciousness creating the world for itself. This, says Lusthaus, is to mischaracterise Yogācāra. Lusthaus writes that rather 'than claiming that a cosmic mind creates the universe, they assert, on the contrary, that one only comes to see things as they actually become by 'abandoning' or destroying (*vyāvṛti*,) the mind' (2002: 5).

We have seen in Vasubandhu's philosophical method that to reify the mind would be as mistaken as denying it outright. As Trivedi puts it, 'consciousness is not the ultimate reality or solution, but rather the root problem' (2005: 233). This is not histrionics or a simple instance of overstating the case. Vasubandhu is, it seems to me, primarily interested in accounting for our experience of the world and how we manage to mistakenly reify things; an act that will then go on to cause us dissatisfaction. In this regard, I think his way of approaching the Buddhist soteric method is analogous to that of Nāgārjuna. Neither seem too concerned with ontological system-building, but are instead trying to give a roadmap by which we can deconstruct our worldviews in order to release ourselves from the existential anxieties that we face. Against the charge of

metaphysical idealism, Trivedi counters ‘that all phenomena as they appear to us, as we know and experience them, are due to the representations and constructions of our consciousness alone (*vijñapti-mātra*). It does not mean, as is sometimes thought, that external objects themselves are created by the mind or are somehow mind-dependent’ (2005: 236). He bases this assessment on the opening verse to Vasubandhu’s *Viṃśatikā*, which I translate as:

*vijñaptimātramevaitadasadarthāvabhāsanāt /
yathā taimirikasyāsatkeśacandrādidarśanam //1//*

[All of] this is consciousness-only (*vijñapti-mātra*), because of the appearance of unreal things, like [a person] with dimmed-eyes¹³⁶ sees unreal hairs, moons and so on.

It is tempting to read a metaphysical idealist position into this. We could interpret Vasubandhu as arguing that only consciousness is real because sometimes we see things exterior to our consciousness that are not real. We might even interpret it to mean that consciousness *creates* the objects that appear to us. I do not think that this is what Vasubandhu is really driving at. Instead, I concur with Lusthaus (2002: 463) and Trivedi (2005: 236) when they argue that Vasubandhu is simply forcing the point that our frame of reference is exclusively tied to our consciousness. Our experiences as we see, feel, and know them are ‘consciousness-only’ because our subjective consciousness of them is the only way in which they can be known. Obviously, this is a quite different claim to that which says Vasubandhu is espousing the mind-dependence of ‘external’ objects. Just because somebody with an eye disorder sees unreal hairs

¹³⁶ I think this odd turn of phrase might relate to cataracts, or some such similar eye condition.

and unreal moons does not mean that every moon or hair they see is unreal. As Trivedi points out, that a person with an eye disorder sees – owing to their faulty perceptual apparatus – some unreal hairs and moons does not mean that there are no hairs or moons whatsoever *outside* of their perceptual apparatus (2005: 236). Thus, for Trivedi, Yogācāra does not necessarily deny events and phenomena external to us: ‘Vasubandhu is not denying that reality exists, as an idealist might do, but instead is only denying that our conceptual constructions, as presented to us, correspond to something out there’ (2005: 237-238). The idea is that for Vasubandhu, reality exists outside of us, it is just the case that our experience of it – as reified – is constructed in consciousness.

Lusthaus has a slightly different take, though it is, like Trivedi, in no way absolutist. For Lusthaus, it is externality itself that is problematic for Yogācārins, and not external objects. This is because we do not experience ‘externality’ in immediate perception – to the Yogācārin, it is another construct that we impose onto an experience after the fact. Externality is unreal insofar as it cannot be directly cognised (it is instead inferred retrospectively), and has no momentary causal efficacy: recall that these are two of the three criteria that Yogācārins use to distinguish the ‘reality’ of phenomena. The idea is that when we retroactively push externality onto phenomena, we do so to appropriate them, which is another way of saying that we do it to forge some degree of attachment. Lusthaus writes that ‘externality is the necessary condition for appropriation’ (2002: 484). I do not think it much of a stretch to add that appropriation is a sufficient condition for attachment! Of course, attachment to phenomena is generally problematic for Buddhists, as I covered in a previous section. Here, we find that attachment is linked with appropriation, which in turn means that we have a degree of attachment to

everything that we cognise. Lusthaus writes that Yogācārins explain this by arguing that because consciousness is an activity that usually requires *consciousness of* (that is to say that 'consciousness' detached from cognition of something makes no sense),¹³⁷ when we are *conscious of* something taken to be external, we *appropriate* it into our cognition (2002: 486). This appropriation is an act that imposes a duality and generally imposes reifications: we appropriate objects or events and think of them as 'real', investing in them attributes, properties and attachments that are not there. The mind, however, is not something that can be appropriated.¹³⁸

Liberation must come, then, as *non-discriminating cognition* (*nirvikalpaka-jñāna*): a type of cognition that does not appropriate anything, does not impose anything, and requires the absence of any sort of discursive, discriminative thought. Sponberg (1979: 52) adds that there is a positive aspect, 'the direct and intuitive cognition of the Absolute', but from what has been discussed, we know that 'absolute' in a Yogācāra sense is not equivalent with 'absolute' as we would understand it, for example, in Advaita. We saw previously that the 'absolute' or 'perfected

¹³⁷ The following extract really gets to the crux of what Lusthaus (2002: 492) is trying to demonstrate:

All I know directly is what happens immediately within my own consciousness. In other words, consciousness is always and everywhere a case of cognitive closure. But the closure can never be absolute. What is not of my consciousness in the genitive and generative sense (i.e., what does not exist simply in virtue of my consciousness either possessing or creating it) may still exert an influence on me, it may still be perceived remotely, i.e., filtered through my cognitive apparatus.

¹³⁸ Lusthaus forces this point when he writes that '[y]ou can't move someone else's mind (or hand) the way you can move your own, since it has an independent *cetanā*. Secondly, hands grasp tangible things. But consciousness does not 'grasp' (*chih*, appropriate) other minds, implying that minds are intangible' (2002: 490).

nature' was the understanding that all experienced phenomena are empty (*śūnyatā*), and so 'direct and intuitive cognition of the absolute' simply amounts to what the Mādhyamika might call 'the realisation of emptiness'.¹³⁹ This cognition is still *of something*, but it is so without appropriation. In this way, the enlightened mind can still operate within the world, but it does not grasp at either the world or itself.

Sponberg argues that *nirvikalpaka-jñāna* is thus a mode that allows the Yogācārin to operate 'in both *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*, in the supramundane Absolute and in the mundane realm of discrimination' (1979: 52), but I think that this is a step too far for reasons outlined above. It seems to me that this is the only real account of *nirvāṇa* open to a Yogācārin: they cannot claim it a permanent place or state for reasons already discussed, and so I wonder in what sense the 'absolute' can really be said to be supramundane. It is not a substratum that supports reality, or a substance that creates reality, such as the *ātman-Brahman*. Much like the Madhyamaka project, Yogācārin liberation lacks an 'essence (*niḥsvabhāva*) to clearly distinguish it from anything else. There is, however, no final and all encompassing essence or *svabhāva* which might function as some sort of essential self or *paramātman* to all things' (King, 1998: 69). It is simply a way of seeing things, a way of interacting with and thinking about the world. Liberation comes when consciousness just *is*; it is conscious *of itself* in its purest form, without appropriation or grasping. This does not suggest to me a hyper-real substratum. Intuition of the perfected aspect is how we reach *apratiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa*, or liberation not permanently established. We know, of

¹³⁹ Whether or not this is actually possible is a debate for another day. My main concern here is not to prove that these conceptions of *nirvāṇa* are realistically feasible, only that the conception of them need not result in some absolute like the *ātman-Brahman*.

course, that it is vital to both the Yogācārin and Mādhyamika accounts of *nirvāṇa* that it *is not* permanent, for permanence of *nirvāṇa* would make it either a separate metaphysical realm, or a permanent mental state that is either eternal and thus not escapable, or eternal and so not attainable.¹⁴⁰

So is the denial of externality a form of metaphysical idealism? Lusthaus claims that the Yogācārins deny externality is real on both doctrinal and pragmatic grounds, and I add that externality is not something immediately cognisable or causally efficacious in the way required for Yogācārins like Vasubandhu to call phenomena ‘real’. There is, however, a catch. Metaphysical idealism is an ontological concern. It looks to explain the way the world is via some means or other. Lusthaus contends, though, that Yogācāra does not care to build an ontology. There is no concern at all for ‘ontological regions, but rather psychosocial regions’ (2002: 484).¹⁴¹ All this means is that – like Nāgārjuna – Vasubandhu and the Yogācārins are primarily interested in how we interact with the world, why we construct reifications, our *karma*, and how we might end *duḥkha* (Lusthaus, 2002: 484). Ontological theorising is a distraction that at best distracts us from and at worst actively works against the Buddhist soteriological method.

Metaphysical idealism is not simply an epistemic concern, though perhaps Bhattacharya and other Advaitins would prefer to characterise it that way. At its heart is the ontological idea

¹⁴⁰ This aside from other problems, such as *nirvāṇa*’s being divorced from *pratītyasamutpāda*, which I have covered elsewhere.

¹⁴¹ ‘Psychosophy’ as a term is popular in some theosophical circles and has its origins in the Greek words ‘*psychē*’ and ‘*sophiā*’. In this context, I think Lusthaus would translate these as ‘mind’ (as opposed to ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’) and ‘wisdom’.

that there is a single source of existence. It is an epistemic shift that allows one to see this truth, but the ontological aspect remains throughout. It is the highest truth that all is *ātman-Brahman*. Yogācāra, as I hope to have demonstrated does not endorse such a position. Indeed, if it is to be philosophically consistent, it *cannot* endorse such a position. Lusthaus cites directly from the *Ch'eng wei-shih lun* to argue that Vasubandhu's Yogācāra recognises the existence of other minds.¹⁴² The idea is that Yogācāra both acknowledges other minds but maintains consciousness-only. Lusthaus' translation is as follows:

You should examine and alertly listen. If there were only a single consciousness how could the ten directions, the sages and ordinary folk, causes and effects, and so on, be distinguished? Who would look for [the teachings] and who would espouse them? What [would differentiate] the Dharma from its seeker? Thus, the words 'wei-shih' have a deep meaning. The word *shih* (consciousness, *vijñapti*, *vijñāna*) in general reveals that all sentient beings each have [their own] eight consciousnesses, six types of caittas, altered [consciousness] (*so-pien*) *qua nimitta*- and *darśana*- [*bhāgas*], distinguishing divisions, and *tathatā* which is disclosed through the principle of emptiness. Since the self-characteristics (*svalakṣaṇa*) of the consciousnesses, [the dharmas] associated with consciousness, the two altered [*bhāgas*], the three divisions, and the four real natures [of the preceding categories], as well as all other dharmas, are never separate from consciousness, we have established the [sense in which we use the] term *shih*.¹⁴³

(Lusthaus, 2002: 487)

¹⁴² The *Ch'eng wei-shih lun* is a Chinese text attributed to Xuanzang. Its Sanskrit name is *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi*, or the *Discourse on the Perfection of Consciousness-only*. It is based around Vasubandhu's *Triṃśikāvijñaptikārikā* and is an important text in Chinese Yogācāra.

¹⁴³ All annotations Lusthaus'.

The central thesis at play is, we can see, that there are of course other minds. We are not simply microcosms of one single supermind, superself, or *paramātman*. The final point made is that the 'only' in consciousness-only is used to force the point that nothing in experience can ever be separated from consciousness, and so it is with consciousness that one must work in order to quell dissatisfying experiences. Lusthaus (2002:491) translates an extract from the *Ch'eng wei-shih lun* which gives an account of how other minds are independent but not separate to our own:

It is only like a mirror, which 'perceives' what appears [within it as] external objects. [This kind of perception is the type we] term 'discerning (*liao*) other minds,' though they can't be immediately - directly discerned. What is discerned immediately-directly is [one's consciousness'] own alterations (*so-pien*). Hence the [*Saṃdhinirmocana*] Sūtra says: There is not the slightest dharma which can grasp the remaining dharmas; only when consciousness arises does one project/perceive the appearance of that, which is called 'grasping that thing.'

The point is that there *are* other consciousnesses, but that we are only aware of them in the first place because of changes in our own consciousness: it is of these changes in our own consciousness that we are *immediately* aware. This means that other minds are both independent of our own consciousness insofar as they exist, but not separate from our own consciousness insofar as we only know of this existence via the changes elicited in our own sphere of consciousness. In this way, then, other minds exist independently of our own mind, but they can never be known outside of our own mind. Can this apply to objects and so in that populate the world? If so, it would banish any spectre of metaphysical idealism within the Yogācāra. Lusthaus (2002: 491) translates the following line in conclusion of the above argument: '[o]ther mind is this sort of condition; rūpa, etc. are the same case.' This is an incredible claim if Yogācāra

is actually idealist in nature. Other minds are real; they exist independently of our own consciousness of them, but it is only in our own consciousness that we can know them. The same is true for *rūpa*, commonly translated as ‘form’, denoting objects, stuff, entities. *Rūpa* is, as Lusthaus writes, ‘a remote *ālambana*’ (2002: 491), or a remote sense-object. It is independent of our consciousness, but not wholly separate from it because our knowledge of it in the first place relies on its causing some effect or change within our consciousness. If this bold claim is true (and there are no reasons that jump out at me to suppose that it is not), then Yogācāra simply cannot be called ‘idealist’ in any of the senses earlier outlined by Lusthaus.

Lusthaus is thus vindicated in his claim that to try to prove that only mind exists, or to take the ‘position’ or view (*dṛṣṭi*) that only mind exists is to miss the point by some distance. Consciousness is that lens through which the Yogācārins analyse experience because it is the means through which we ‘do’ our experiencing. Lusthaus is right to state that consciousness so analysed by the Yogācārins – not as a permanent immutable entity, but as an ever-responding, ever-changing, intersubjective flux consisting of consecutive *moments of consciousness* – is difficult to cling and attach to. In Lusthaus’ words, ‘[c]onsciousness itself is in and as itself impossible to grasp, rendering it less susceptible to the psychosophic abuses that an external, physical, possessible world is prone to, or even encourages. One can cling to ideas, but not a fleeting moment of consciousness’ (2002: 488). *This* is the crux of the Yogācārin method. This understanding does not resemble any of the forms of idealism outlined at the beginning of this subsection, and it certainly does not resemble a monistic absolutist doctrine comparable to that of the Advaitins. Consequently, it is my contention that Yogācāra philosophy understood as it is

in this work *is not* absolutist and cannot lead to the conclusion that all of reality is the *ātman-Brahman*.

§5: Madhyamaka and Absolutism

I have already said that Bhattacharya is not alone in claiming that Buddhism teaches some sort of absolutism. It would be a misrepresentation of the Buddhist literature – at least from a Mahāyāna point of view – to claim otherwise. I follow Tillemans (forthcoming) in acknowledging that insofar as Mahāyāna Buddhism speaks of the *dharmakāya*, it tends to do so in an absolute sense; that is to say that discussions around *dharmakāya* usually tend to hold it as some sort of ultimate reality, the essential nature from which the entirety of reality emanates. Tillemans argues – wisely, in my view – that we should not be so quick to write off absolutistic notions in Mahāyāna literature as some sort of ‘wrong reading’ imputed by a modern bias. To do so, he argues would be to ignore a major trend in Indian Buddhist thought and to throw out the proverbial baby with the bathwater. He writes that ‘there were important ways *Prajñāpāramitā* and *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* commentators took *dharmakāya* as a substantive and accorded it an absolute sense. This is not a theological flight of fancy; it is a major philosophical idea in Buddhist scholasticism’ (Tillemans, forthcoming: 6, note 9). It is clear then that despite what we know of the traditional Buddhist preoccupation with insubstantiality and avoidance of absolutes of any kind (this is, after all, what the famed ‘middle path’ is all about!), there is a relatively strong tradition within the Mahāyāna schools of asserting an absolute reality. I do not contest this – it is a matter of historical fact. Instead, I want to argue that this assertion of an absolute reality is not a *necessary* part of the Mahāyāna. Further, I want to argue that Nāgārjuna – the Mahāyāna’s founding father – does not appear to support any such assertion in his seminal writing, the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK), and as we have seen, no absolutism is endorsed in the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (VV). With this in mind, I will discuss some of the terms pointed to by

Bhattacharya as equivalent (2015: 13) and analysing them – as far as possible – in a Madhyamaka context. In so doing, I hope to show that Nāgārjuna did not – and so we need not – impute from such terms any idea of an Absolute like the *Upaniṣadic ātman-Brahman*.

5.1 Understanding *Dharmakāya*

Despite the Mahāyāna tendency to speak of *dharmakāya* in positive, absolutist terms, it would be disingenuous to state that the use of *dharmakāya* (or its Pāli equivalent, *dhammakāya*) in wider Buddhist literature and traditions is *always* absolute. There is a strong, demonstrable Theravāda tradition that views *dharmakāya/dhammakāya* as the sum of the Buddha's verbal teachings or even the sum of the Buddha's mental qualities (and so correctly discerning all *dharmas* is the *dhammakāya*). I will return to this reading shortly. Chanida attributes the difference in interpretation to Buddhaghoṣa, who at various points in his works tends to use *dhammakāya* in these different ways (Chanida, 2008: 6). Following Buddhaghoṣa, says Chanida, Dhammapāla¹⁴⁴ interpreted *dhammakāya* 'as bodies of those extraordinary qualities connected with the Buddha's mental purity' (Chanida, 2008: 7, note 36).¹⁴⁵ It seems obvious to me that 'bodies' can here be understood in terms of a collection, viz. the collection of qualities connected with the Buddha's mental purity, or the collection of qualities possessed by *tathāgatas*. It is this

¹⁴⁴ Though there are multiple Theravāda writers of this name, I here refer to that Dhammapāla famed for commentaries on seven early Theravāda texts in or around the fifth century.

¹⁴⁵ I think it relatively uncontroversial to assume that 'body' here refers to a collection of something – in this case, qualities or teachings – in the same vein as 'aggregate'. It need not refer to a physical body, but simply a collection of content that is in some way linked or alike.

interpretation (as opposed to a metaphysically substantialist absolute interpretation) that I contend is necessitated by Nāgārjuna's wider philosophical outlook.

The principal passage cited in regards to the appearance of *dharmakāya*'s appearance in the canonical literature is *Dīgha Nikāya* (DN) 27.9 (*Aggaññasutta*), the rear end of which states (in Pāli):

*Taṃ kissa hetu? Tathāgatassa h'etaṃ Vāseṭṭhā, adhivacanam
dharmakāyo iti pi, brahmakāyo iti pi, dhammabhūto iti pi,
brahmabhūto iti iti pi.*

Why is this? Because, Vāseṭṭha, this designates the Tathāgata
dharmakāya, brahmakāya, dhammabhūta, brahmabhūta.

How we choose to render these words is of crucial importance. Let us begin with *dharmakāya*: is the *Tathāgata* designated as the collection of their teachings? Are they simply the sum of their mental qualities? Is, as some Mahāyānists would have us think, the *Tathāgata* to be designated as the manifestation of an unchanging, ever-present ultimate reality? There is a lot of ground to cover here, and I do not intend to tread all of it. Instead, I will give a brief overview of the different ways that *dharmakāya/dharmakāya* might be interpreted and then assess these interpretations in the light of Madhyamaka philosophy more broadly construed.

It is from this starting point then that I will contest Bhattacharya's claim that the Mahāyāna 'put things right' (2015: 39) in terms of developing an absolutist theory, and that it is the Mahāyāna texts that classify the ultimate as '*śūnyatā, tathatā, bhūtakoti, dharmadhātu, dharma-kāya* . . . and also *ātman* in the Upaniṣadic sense' (2015: 13). I will argue that for Nāgārjuna at least (and so for Indian Madhyamaka) this equivalence is mistaken, and that *śūnyatā, dharmakāya* are, whilst related to the same soteriological aims, nevertheless distinct.

I start, then, with *dharmakāya*. Echoing what has been said above, Paul Harrison explains that

the *dharmakaya* ("Dharma-body," "Body of Truth," "Cosmic Body," "Absolute Body," etc.) is both formless and imperishable, representing the identification of the Buddha with the truth which he revealed, or with reality itself. As such the *dharmakaya* is often linked with various terms for reality, such as *dharmata*, *dharmadhatu*, and so on, and has even been regarded as a kind of Buddhist absolute, or at least at one with it.

(Harrison, 1992: 44)

We can see how *dharmakāya* might be interpreted, but so far we are no better off in terms of understanding why this is the case. It is later in the article that Harrison really sets out his stall. Analysing the use of *dharmakāya* in the whole *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitāsūtra* (*AsPP*), Harrison lists five instances in which the compound occurs and argues that translators sometimes get their interpretations wrong. This is, he argues, because there is a tendency to assume that *dharmakāya* is to be always interpreted as a noun (thus as a *tatpuruṣa* or *karmadhāraya* substantive) rather than as a *bahuvrīhi* adjective (1992: 50). His reading of *dharmakāya* at chapters 4, 17, and 31 of the *AsPP* as an adjectival compound is, he argues, in line with the Pāli equivalent as used at *DN* 27.9, where it is, he says, meant to be understood as an attribute of the Buddha rather than as a thing in itself. Thus he writes that '[t]o put it in more elegant English, the Buddha is truly "embodied" in the *dharmma*, rather than his physical person' (1992: 51). Eckel (1992: 97) has a slightly different take on things, citing passages from *AsPP* III.¹⁴⁶

These passages show the Buddha determining that a person who is devoted to the *Perfection of*

¹⁴⁶ The translation used by Eckel is that of Conze, 1973 (specifically, the passages contained between pages 105-107).

Wisdom (reading, reflecting on, reciting, honouring, and reproducing the text) will receive greater merit than a person that builds and worships *stūpas* containing relics of the Buddha. In this sense, says Eckel, the ‘Dharma body’ is the *prajñāpāramitā* text, and it is, in a real sense, a relic of the Buddha. It is not then the Buddha himself that is embodied in the text, but a relic of his thought (Eckel, 1992: 98).¹⁴⁷

Also of relevance to *AsPP* III are the occurrences of *śarīra*. Eckel translates *śarīra* as ‘relic’ (such as the remains of the Buddha, a monk, a historic religious item); it can also simply mean ‘body’, usually (though – importantly – not always) in the physical sense. It is, then, arguably

¹⁴⁷ Eckel (1992: 97) also makes the point that the extract given below is not drawing any sort of distinction between worship of a relic and study of a text; nor is it drawing a distinction between relics that are physical or intellectual. Instead, writes Eckel, ‘[i]t is simply drawing contrast between the worship of one physical object and another.’ He later elaborates on this, writing that ‘[c]omparisons between different kinds of worship are common in Buddhist literature’, before giving some examples (1992: 213, note 4). This is a fair point to raise (it is indeed true of many Buddhist writings!), and it is one that has some merit here – a great deal of time is spent extolling the virtue of honouring the *Perfection of Wisdom* by covering it in cloth, garlands of flowers, surrounding it with bells and flags, and so on.

However, it is also worth noting that the Buddha spends a lot of time detailing in the extract to *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā* 3 exactly how ‘cognizing the all-knowing’ is so important to other beings’ (viz. to people that are not the Buddha) spiritual journey. Similarly, the Buddha emphasises that worship of the *Prajñāpāramitā* is identical to worshipping the cognition of the omniscient (and so worshipping the Buddha’s own thoughts and teachings), and he does not say this in isolation. When the Buddha speaks of the ‘cognizance of omniscience’, it appears that his meaning is that it is the practitioner that does the cognizing of the Buddha’s omniscience – in so doing, the practitioner actually takes part in the *Perfection of Wisdom*, even if only at an elementary, basic level. This, it seems to me, suggests that the practitioner *is indeed* being urged to engage with the text: to study the text is to cognise the (words: thoughts: teachings of) the omniscient. To worship the book that the text is written in without studying (reading) it is, it seems obvious to me, to cognise none of these things. Honouring it with flowers, oils, holy robes and so on is but one aspect of the process – yes, it will gain merit according to Buddhist orthodoxy, but is that really enough? Can these ritualistic acts really be called ‘cognizing the all-knowing’? Does ritual (which can be performed pretty mindlessly) really amount to the ‘cognizance of omniscience’? I think not. It strikes me that cognising the thoughts/words of the omniscient entails reading or hearing them, especially if we are to have the *dharma-body*, *saṅgha-body*, and *Buddha-body* ‘revealed’ to us! Simply placing a book on a pedestal and prostrating before it and so on is, whilst useful in dedicatory and *karmic* terms, surely not enough to ‘cognize the omniscience of the all-knowing’. Of course, a short but significant feature of the *AsPP* extract given below is the idea that the person ‘copies out’ the book – I suspect it would be very difficult to copy out a book in a language one understands without engaging with its contents!

technically distinct from *kāya*, which can refer to a physical body or a collective ‘body’ (aggregate; group: of texts, for example), though any distinction that I have found seems to be imposed by later writers in the commentarial traditions. It is, though, when instances of the compound *dharmasārīra* occur that things become a little more blurry. The compound *dharmasārīra* can, according to the Monier-Williams Sanskrit Dictionary, mean either a body or collection of virtues, or a body or collection of Buddhist relics (Monier-Williams, 1960 512) – recall that *dharmakāya* can mean a collection of something, too. With this in mind, it looks as though *sārīra* might – in the context of the compound *dharmasārīra* – provide some clue as to how the Buddha’s ‘truth body’ is to be understood after all.

Indeed, at *AsPP* III, it looks as though either understanding of *dharmasārīra* can apply: the *prajñāpāramitā* texts referred to by the Buddha can be said to be a ‘relic’ of his thought, but they can also be said to contain – documentarily, at least – the *body of virtues* possessed by or the *body of teachings* conveyed by the Buddha.¹⁴⁸ Some scholars understand *dharmasārīra* still differently, arguing that it can be equated with *dharmakāya* – I have Mitomo (1983) in mind,

¹⁴⁸ I tentatively suggest that ‘relic’ would be here understood in one of two ways. First is to see the book containing the *Prajñāpāramitā* as a historical relic in the way that an ancient Bible might be (and so an object of historical or cultural significance that has survived from a much earlier time). The second way would be to treat the book itself as a religious relic that elevates the capturing of the Buddha’s thoughts to the same sort of level as a physical relic of the same sort as a piece of his body that has been preserved after death. Either one can be argued for in the current context, though I do not find either particularly convincing in the wider context of the passage cited. That a book outlining the *Prajñāpāramitā* can be a ‘collection of virtues’ in an abstract way is, I suggest, relatively uncontroversial. Insofar as the book faithfully documents the teachings of the Buddha – teachings based on and stemming from the Buddha’s virtues as an enlightened being – it can be claimed to be a ‘collection of virtues’ at least in an abstracted documentary sense: a documented collection detailing the Buddha’s virtues. Indeed, there are those that claim that shrines to books containing *prajñāpāramitā* teachings are identical to *dharmakāya* in the transcendental sense (Mitomo, 1983: 1119), and so they are physical manifestations of the Absolute. Needless to say that I do not think that this is the appropriate conclusion to draw here.

here (though he is not alone on this). Whilst I will eventually argue that *dharmaśarīra* and *dharmakāya* can be thought of in analogous terms (in at least some significant ways), I do not think that we need necessarily subscribe to any absolutist or transcendental interpretations. The details of all these interpretations will be discussed shortly, looking at a couple of excerpts from the *AsPP*. I will then give what I think should be a typical Madhyamaka response to ideas of absolutism and transcendentalism, drawing primarily on the work of Nāgārjuna. In the excerpt of the *AsPP* that I have chosen, we find the following:¹⁴⁹

Thus spake Śakra Devānāmindra (Lord of the Gods): ‘The Lord has said that it is through learning the perfection of wisdom that the Tathāgata has obtained supreme enlightenment [and] perfect understanding.’

¹⁴⁹ Extract from *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā* 3:

evamukte śakro devānāmindro bhagavantametadavocatihaiva bhagavan bhagavatā prajñāpāramitāyāṃ śikṣamāṇena tathāgatenārhatā samyaksaṃbuddhena anuttarā samyaksaṃbodhiḥ sarvajñatā pratilabdā abhisambuddhā / bhagavānāhatasmāttarhi kauśika nānenātmabhāvaśarīrapratilambhena tathāgatastathāgata iti saṃkhyāṃ gacchati / sarvajñatāyāṃ tu pratilabdhyāṃ tathāgatastathāgata iti saṃkhyāṃ gacchati / yeyam kauśika sarvajñatā tathāgatasyārhatāḥ samyaksaṃbuddhasya prajñāpāramitānirjātāḥ / eṣa ca kauśika tathāgatasyātmabhāvaśarīrapratilambhaḥ prajñāpāramitopāyakaśālyanirjātāḥ sa sarvajñajñānāśrayabhūto bhavati / enaṃ hyāśrayaṃ niśritya sarvajñajñānasya prabhāvanā bhavati, buddhaśarīraprabhāvanā bhavati dharmaśarīraprabhāvanā bhavati saṃghaśarīraprabhāvanā bhavati / ityevaṃ sarvajñajñānāhetuko'yamātmabhāvaśarīrapratilambhaḥ sarvajñajñānāśrayabhūtātvaśarvasattvānāṃ caityabhūto vandanīyaḥ satkaraṇīyo gurukaraṇīyo mānanīyaḥ pūjanīyo'rcanīyo'pacāyanīyaḥ saṃvṛtto bhavati / evaṃ ca mama parinirvṛtasyāpi sataḥ eṣāṃ śārīrāṇāṃ pūjā bhaviṣyati / tasmāttarhi kauśika yaḥ kaścitkulaputro vā kuladuhitā vā imāṃ prajñāpāramitāṃ likhitvā pustakagatāṃ vā kṛtvā sthāpayet enāṃ ca divyābhiḥ puṣpadhūpagandhamālyavilepanacūrṇacivaracchatradhvajaghaṇṭāpatākābhiḥ satkuryāt gurukuryāt mānayet pūjayet arcayet apacāyet ayameva kauśika tayoḥ kulaputrayoḥ kuladuhitro vā bahutaraṃ puṇyaṃ prasavet / tatkaśya hetoḥ sarvajñajñānasya hi kauśika tena kulaputreṇa vā kuladuhitrā vā pūjā kṛtā bhaviṣyati yaḥ kulaputro vā kuladuhitā vā iha prajñāpāramitāyāṃ likhyamānāyāṃ pustakagatāyāṃ vā satkāraṃ gurukāraṃ mānanāṃ pūjanāmarcanāmapacāyanāṃ pūjāṃ ca vividhāṃ kuryāt ayameva tato bahutaraṃ puṇyaṃ prasavet / tatkaśya hetoḥ sarvajñajñānasya hi kauśika tena pūjā kṛtā bhaviṣyati yaḥ prajñāpāramitāyai pūjāṃ kariṣyati //

The Lord [responds]: ‘Therefore, Kauśika, [it is] not by obtaining this physical personality¹⁵⁰ that the tathāgata comes to be called (*saṃkhyāṃ gacchati*) the tathāgata, [it is] by obtaining omniscience [that] the tathāgata comes to be called the tathāgata.’

‘Kauśika, the omniscience of the tathāgata, of one who has attained complete enlightenment, comes forth from the perfection of wisdom.’

‘Kauśika, the physical personality of the tathāgata, [on which the] cognizance [of] omniscience is dependent, is the result of skill-in-means [of] understanding the perfection of wisdom.’¹⁵¹

‘Supported by this cognizance [of] omniscience, the Buddha-body, Dharma-body, and Saṅgha-body are revealed.’¹⁵²

‘As the [acquisition of the] physical personality causes [the] cognizance [of] omniscience, the cognition [that] causes omniscience becomes a refuge [and a] shrine for all beings. [It is] worthy of being honoured, of being revered and of being worshipped.’

‘And after my *parinirvāṇa*, [my] relics will [also] be worshipped.’

¹⁵⁰ I follow Conze (1973: 105) in here translating *ātmabhāvaśarīra* as ‘physical personality’ rather than ‘physical body’ or variations on that theme. This is because in the context of this extract, talk of a physical body without the connotations of the connected personality seems redundant: the Buddha has acquired a certain personality, a set of personal dispositions, in virtue of his enlightenment and omniscience. It would be bizarre to say that the Buddha had acquired his physical body in virtue of his enlightenment – he was necessarily embodied before he was enlightened! Harvey (1995: 234) writes of the Buddha’s ‘personality’ that ‘when the Buddha is in a non-nibbanic state, he manifests his nature by a ‘body’, or personality, which is redolent with factors of the Path’, illustrating that what technically means ‘body’ can here be translated in this manner.

¹⁵¹ I think that the Buddha must mean that the ‘cognizance of omniscience’ *by other people* is dependent upon the *tathāgata*’s personality, viz. the Buddha’s personality – modified upon becoming awakened (thanks to the *Perfection of Wisdom*) – is what is responsible for conveying his omniscience to others so that they might cognize it. I suppose that this would occur when the practitioner dedicates themselves to copying out the book.

¹⁵² I have here translated *buddhaśarīra*, *dharmaśarīra* and *saṅghaśarīra* as ‘Buddha-body’, ‘Dharma-body’, and ‘saṅgha-body’ rather than ‘Buddha-relic’, ‘dharma-relic’, and ‘saṅgha-relic’. It could be argued, however, that each are ‘relics’ that are revealed through awareness of the omniscient if we understand ‘relic’ to be the historic record of the Buddha’s thought/teaching, in which case, awareness of or cognizance of omniscience might be said to ‘reveal’ the Buddhas thoughts on each aspect in turn. We can also choose to interpret these things as a *body of ideas* related to each jewel (I do not think it a coincidence that the choice of ‘bodies’ marries to the three jewels prescribed by the Buddha!). The significance of each of these bodies is thus made clear upon our cognizance of omniscience, viz. upon our awareness of the thoughts/teachings of the omniscient (the Buddha).

‘Therefore, Kauśika, whoever – son or daughter of noble birth – having copied [out] the Perfection of Wisdom, having made [it into] a book, establishing it, worshipping it, honouring it with *pūjā*, with heavenly flags, banners, perfume, flowers, bells [et cetera], this being the case Kauśika, those two will produce greater merit.’

‘In so doing, Kauśika, the son or daughter of noble birth [that has] made a copy of the Perfection of Wisdom, who worships, honours and respects it with *pūjās* of many kinds; they produce the greatest merit.’

Why so? Because, Kauśika, in worshipping the Perfection of Wisdom, he worships the cognition [of the] omniscient.’¹⁵³

As touched on earlier, we have in this passage two central ideas at play. First, we have the idea that adherence to the *Perfection of Wisdom* is the only way to achieve enlightenment (and so omniscience). Second, we have the idea that a person that writes down (and reproduces – an arduous task requiring concentration and dedication) the *Perfection of Wisdom* and honours it (via worship, and, presumably, by living according to it) will be performing a deed more meritorious than the person that simply worships the relics of the Buddha’s physical body after his death. It is the distinction between the significance of worshipping and honouring the *words* (and so *thoughts*) of the Buddha over and above his physical body that primarily interests me, but both aspects are relevant to the current discussion.

The Buddha is very clearly attempting to impress upon Śakra (also referred to as Kauśika) the importance of the *Perfection of Wisdom* to both accrual of merit (*karman*) and to liberation.

¹⁵³ I chose this particular passage from the *AsPP* because I think that for my purposes, it gives the most comprehensive overview in the shortest amount of space. That is to say that it almost makes the point for me that the ‘body of the Dharma’ can be contained in a book chronicling the Buddha’s thoughts and teachings. Indeed, the Buddha himself says that ‘in worshipping the Perfection of Wisdom, [the practitioner] worships the omniscient’.

The Buddha says that enlightenment ‘comes forth from the Perfection of Wisdom’ and that omniscience is dependent upon ‘understanding the Perfection of Wisdom’, emphasising the significance of meditative insight into reality when it comes to liberation.¹⁵⁴ The Buddha makes a distinction between his personality (and so his dispositions, his methods of teaching and so on) and his status as a *tathāgata*, and this is simply because he wants to force the point that he is not awakened *because of* his personality. He is awakened because he has completely and perfectly understood the *Perfection of Wisdom*, which itself facilitates omniscience. In fact, the Buddha’s personality is, he claims, simply a result of skill-in-means: ‘Kauśika, the physical personality of the tathāgata is the result of skill-in-means and [of] understanding the perfection of wisdom [on which] omniscience is dependent.’ This seems to suggest that the Buddha’s personality is a manifestation of the *Perfection of Wisdom* that comes about as a result of the Buddha’s skill-in-means of the same *Perfection of Wisdom*. In other words, owing to the Buddha’s skill in both understanding the *Perfection of Wisdom* and in teaching it, his personality comes to manifest that same *Perfection of Wisdom* (i.e. he ‘lives’ what he teaches; he is an embodiment of the *Perfection of Wisdom*). This reading is, I believe, supported elsewhere in the

¹⁵⁴ There are different ways to understand exactly what such insight involves. A common way to understand the purposes of the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts is to see them as guides that aim to direct the practitioner to the nature of ultimate reality (which is generally characterised as non-dual, non-conceptual, and transcendental). In this sense, then, it is easy to see how such a transcendental focus on non-duality would appeal to Bhattacharya, especially given that, as Harrison (1992: 48) points out, this non-dual transcendental vision of reality is also non-conceptual: it sounds precisely like the *ātman-Brahman* described by Bhattacharya! It is not clear, however, that this is the only way to understand the *Prajñāpāramitā*: somebody like Nāgārjuna, for example, would in my opinion object to the idea of immersion into a true reality and instead argue that the quelling of conceptual thought need not necessitate a oneness with some sort of essential principle. On this reading, the general thrust of the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts would be preserved, viz. their direction toward a meditative state that precludes conceptual thought (and so halts reification of entities).

Buddhist canonical and post-canonical texts. For example, at *Samyutta Nikāya* (SN) 22.87 we see the Buddha referring to himself as the embodiment of the *dhmma* (*dharma*):

Alaṃ vakkali kiṃ te iminā pūtikāyena diṭṭhena? Yo kho, vakkali, dhammaṃ passati so maṃ passati; yo maṃ passati so dhammaṃ passati. Dhammañhi, vakkali, passanto maṃ passati; maṃ passanto dhammaṃ passati.

Stop, Vakkali! Why [do] you [want to] see this foul body? He who sees [the] *Dhamma*, Vakkali, sees me; he who sees me, sees [the] *Dhamma*. In seeing [the] *Dhamma*, Vakkali, [one] sees me; in seeing me, [one] sees [the] *Dhamma*.¹⁵⁵

The Buddha says at *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā* 3 that ‘supported by this omniscience, the Buddha-body, Dharma-body, and Saṅgha-body are revealed’, which can be understood in a couple of different ways. First, in the obvious transcendentalist manner. On this view, the omniscient *tathāgata* sees the transcendental truths of the *dharma*-body, *saṅgha*-body, and *buddha*-body – presumably as ultimate essential principles in the same vein as the transcendental *dharmakāya* as explained by Paul Harrison (1992: 44). We already know that for a significant number of Buddhists, the *dharmakāya* is to be understood in such a manner. This being the case, then why should we not also interpret *dharmasārīra* – a word which can in principle be a synonym of *dharmakāya* – in the same way? It occurs to me that if we are to take *dharmasārīra* in this sense, then we must also for the sake of consistency take *saṃghasārīra* and

¹⁵⁵ One might also advance the argument that when the Buddha says that he ‘is’ the *dhmma*, he is speaking figuratively in accordance with *upāya* (expedient means, skilful means). This would mean that his ‘being’ the *dhmma* is not necessarily an ultimate truth (and so does not reflect the way that things really are – he is not *literally* the *dhmma*), but is simply a helpful pedagogical device that allows the practitioner to better orientate themselves toward the path.

buddhaśarīra in the same sense. Indeed, it looks as though they are intended to be taken in the same sense when we read them in context in the Sanskrit.

This is, I think, where things become a little problematic for a transcendentalist approach – at least if we want to view the transcendentalist view as one of metaphysical ultimate realities in the vein of some popular understandings of *dharmakāya*. First, it is not obvious to me how we might take the ‘*saṅgha*-body’ in a strongly transcendental sense. By this I mean I am unsure how a metaphysical transcendence might be accounted for in the same way that, for example, there is sometimes a metaphysical import to *dharmakāya* as ultimate reality. If we understand *saṅghaśarīra* as ‘*saṅgha*-relic’, we might understand the book (that is the *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā*) as containing documentary evidence of the *saṅgha* in a similar way that we can understand it as providing documentary evidence of the Buddha’s teachings and documentary evidence of the collection of virtues necessarily possessed by any *buddha*. In this sense, it is a ‘relic’ of thought and praxis. It can, it seems to me, also be simultaneously understood as a ‘body’ of thought and praxis, and so if we move away from the notion of ‘body’ as a transcendental metaphysically Real ‘thing’, the precise translation seems to matter less.¹⁵⁶

In any case, the transcendentalism issue is, I think, more of an issue here than it is for *Dharma-body* and *Buddha-body*. Both *Dharma-body* and *Buddha-body* can be understood transcendently as essentially the same thing – Bhāvaviveka certainly thought that there was no

¹⁵⁶ I have intentionally neglected to comment on the sense of *śarīra* as physical relics left behind after a monk or *buddha* has died and been cremated. Whilst these might be interesting in a wider Buddhological context, it is clear enough that this is not an application referred to in the extract of *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā* 3.

difference at all between the *Dharma*-body and the *Buddha*-body (which is for all intents and purposes identical to the *Tathāgata*-body that he references (Eckel, 1992: 42)).¹⁵⁷ I suppose that in some loose sense, we might be able to claim that the spiritual endeavours of each member of the *saṅgha* (be they layperson or monastic) ‘transcends’ the physical borders of specific Buddhist groups, communities, countries and so on. This sort of understanding would simply mean that there is some ‘thing’ that binds members of the *saṅgha* outside of their cultural or communal bounds: a Buddhist in Sri Lanka shares something with a Buddhist in North America, who in turn shares something with a Buddhist in South Africa, for example. This shared aspect is Buddhism – to this extent, then, we might say that the *saṅgha*-body transcends borders and so on. And yet this sense of ‘transcend’ seems fundamentally different to the sense advanced in discussions of the *dharmakāya* – instead of some strong sense of metaphysical transcendence, of transcendence into a metaphysical Reality, we have a weaker transcendence; one that is linked by ideas. The *saṅgha*-body is a transcendental entity then insofar as it is a set of shared ideals that extends further than individuals, small communities, and even nations. Of course, Nāgārjuna

¹⁵⁷ Eckel also translates significant portions of Bhāvaviveka’s *Madhyamakahrdayakārikās* (MHK) and the accompanying commentary, the *Tarkajvālā*, and it is here that we can really see the transcendental import around the ideas of *Dharma*-body, *tathāgata*-body, and *Buddha*-body:

idaṃ tat paramaṃ brahma brahmādyairyaṇṇa grhyate /
idaṃ tat paramaṃ satyaṃ satyavādī jagau munīḥ //289//

Now, that Supreme Brahman is not grasped by [those (gods)] attached to and connected with
 Brahma /
 That sage [who] spoke the truth taught that this [Dharma-body] is the ultimate truth //

What is interesting here is the manner in which Bhāvaviveka attempts to distinguish the ‘supreme Brahman’ (MHK III.289) of the Hindus (and so the Advaitins), and that of the Buddhists – especially Mādhyamikas. It is the *Dharma*-body however it is conceived) which is the ultimate truth, not the Supreme Brahman that eludes those associated with Brahma.

would acknowledge that any such identity is not ultimately real and does not have *svabhāva*. This would mean that the *saṅgha*-body is a conceptual construct, which in turn makes it conventional. The same applies to the ideas, rules, and beliefs shared by ‘members’ of this body.

Indeed, the context of *dharmakāya* in the Sarvāstivādin interpretation appears to be different still! Guang Xing writes that on the Sarvāstivādin view, Buddhists take refuge in the *dharmakāya* of the Buddha because the *rupakāya*¹⁵⁸ is impure. What precisely does this mean? Xing interprets a section of the *Mahāvibhāṣa*:

Some people say that to take refuge in the Buddha is to take refuge in the body of the Tathāgata, which comprises head, neck, stomach, back, hands and feet. It is explained that the body, born of father and mother, is composed of the defiled *dharmas*, and therefore is not a source of refuge. The refuge is the Buddha’s fully accomplished qualities (*aśaikṣadharmas*)¹⁵⁹ which comprise *bodhi* and the *dharmakāya*.

(2005: 49)

The last sentence is the interesting part of this extract – the Sarvāstivādins recognised that the Buddha’s physical body is necessarily impure given that it is made up of defiled *dharmas*. This is the case whether the Buddha has ‘nothing left to learn’ or not – in virtue of his body being

¹⁵⁸ This is perhaps best translated as the ‘physical body’ or ‘physical form’ of an enlightened being, where *rūpa* is ‘form’ and *kāya* is ‘body’. This is usually described as the physical form of an enlightened being, viewed as a living embodiment of wisdom or as the embodiment of qualities.

¹⁵⁹ We can translate *aśaikṣadharmas* as something like ‘*dharmas* of those with nothing left to learn.’ There are said to be ten such *dharmas* and so the implication is relatively clear: the Buddha has acquired the ten qualities that constitute liberation. It is in these qualities that we must take refuge, which is to say that these qualities can also liberate us provided that we work on their cultivation.

physical (even if it is the physical manifestation of wisdom!), it is impure and conditioned.

Precisely because this is the case, Xing further writes that

[t]he emphasis of the Sarvāstivāda is on the attainment of Buddhahood, the *dharmakāya*, while the physical body is considered secondary. The *dharmakāya* of all Buddhas is the same. Therefore, according to the Sarvāstivāda, taking refuge in the Buddha is to take refuge in all Buddhas because the term 'Buddha' includes all the Tathāgatas since they are of the same kind. Thus another question arises: since the *dharmakāya* or the Dharma is so important to the Sarvāstivādins, why do they first take refuge in the Buddha and not the Dharma? The Sarvāstivādins explained that the Buddha was the founder. If the founder had not taught, then the Dharma would not have been manifested. Thus the Buddha is seen as the first refuge, just as a patient first seeks a good doctor before asking him for medicine. The patient then seeks a nurse to prepare the medicine. The Buddha is like the doctor, the Dharma like the medicine, and the *Samgha* is the nurse. Such is the order of the three refuges.

(2005: 50)

I think that this helps clarify things a little. The practitioner first seeks refuge in the Buddha, specifically in his *āśaikṣadharmā*. This is, we can see, equivalent to taking refuge in *all buddhas* because every *buddha* is of the same sort: they have the same *āśaikṣadharmā* in virtue of following the same path and attaining the same insight and wisdom. In saying that the *dharmakāya* of all *buddhas* is identical, Xing appears to be claiming that every *buddha* manifests or embodies the *dharma* in the same way, presumably because they have attained the same insights and wisdom. He adds elsewhere that the earliest Buddhists probably understood the *dharmakāya* simply as the teachings of the Buddha, and then later as the scripture containing these teachings (2005: 36). It was from this latter position, Xing suggests, that disagreements

between schools regarding how to quantify the *dharmakāya* began to spring forth.¹⁶⁰ It is not too much of a step to see how from discussions of quantification (in terms of possession of *dharmas*) there could be reification of the *dharmakāya* as a transcendental Absolute, especially given how Karunadasa (1996: 20) accounts for the supposed ultimacy of *dharmas*. Nevertheless, the suggestion at this point is that the *dharmakāya* is still being thought of as a collection of qualities rather than as an Absolute of some kind. The practitioner then takes refuge in the *saṅgha* (Buddhist community, usually of monastics), which Xing describes as a nurse that prepares medicine (and presumably gives support – monks and nuns generally live, chant, and meditate together). The *Dharma* itself is then the medicine, prescribed by the doctor (the Buddha), and administered by the *saṅgha* who then support you while it takes effect. Refuge is to be taken in all three because all three are vital to curing our dissatisfaction (*duḥkha*).¹⁶¹

We can see then that in principle, *dharmakāya* and *dharmasārīra* have a close relationship with each other. In *dharmakāya*, we have reference to the collection of *Dharma*: the totality of the Buddha's teachings, or we have reference to the *dharmas* possessed by the Buddha that allows him to manifest his wisdom and that account for the character of his

¹⁶⁰ Xing (2005: 36-44) provides a very thorough account of how the *dharmas* that constitute various conceptions of *dharmakāya* might be interpreted according to the schools from which each list originated. It is outside of the scope of my current aims to go into much more detail on this.

¹⁶¹ There could be a case made that the *prajñāpāramitā* texts constitute a *dharmakāya* in a slightly different – but no less absolutist – manner. The Sikhs have their *Guru Granth Sahib*; a collection of holy scriptures that form the basis of the Sikh religion but which are also taken in a very literal sense to be the living leader of the Sikh faith. The collection of texts is thus seen as an eternal, living, real manifestation of God's word and will. It is in principle possible to interpret Buddhist scriptures in a similar vein, as an eternal, 'living' manifestation of the Absolute (I am not aware of any sect which does this). On such a reading, the *Tathāgata* is designated '*dharmakāya*' insofar as they are a fleeting physical manifestation of this eternal Absolute.

enlightened state: the difference here seems to be negligible. In *dharmasārīra*, we have either reference to the collection of virtues acquired by the Buddha (and so extolled in Buddhist literature), or the ‘relic’ documenting the Buddha’s cognition (and so communicated in the ensuing literature). Let us not forget that the Buddha’s teachings are supposed to lead to a state of affairs where the practitioner can too acquire the virtues of a *tathāgata* (and thus awaken): it seems to me that it is the case that *dharmakāya* and *dharmasārīra* are two sides of the very same soteriological coin. To put it another way, a practitioner cannot awaken without acquiring the collection of virtues that all *tathāgatas* have possessed (possessing these virtues necessarily means that any defilements are removed). The general idea is that practitioners would struggle to acquire these virtues without first being told and shown how to by the Buddha’s (collective) teachings.¹⁶² Further, to understand and adhere to the teachings *is to acquire the virtues*, whilst to acquire the virtues is to know the ‘essence’ of the body of the Buddha’s teachings. It seems clear to me, then, that the *dharmakāya* need not be characterised as an eternal metaphysical absolute that is somehow ‘entered into’ by advanced practitioners. It can instead be understood as the collected ‘body’ of teachings and virtues; it can be understood as a mere concept. As we know, for Nāgārjuna, all concepts are constructed and conventional, and this happily bypasses any idea of ultimate existence. It is my contention, then, that this interpretation of *dharmakāya* might look like something that Nāgārjuna would endorse.

¹⁶² It is not impossible to reach liberation without hearing and understanding the Buddha’s teachings, at least according to the Mahāyāna; it is simply rare.

5.2 *Brahmakāya, Dhammabhūta, Brahmabhūta*

The next of the four words that we need to place in context is *brahmakāya*.¹⁶³ This can be rendered as *brahma-body*, which Walshe (1995: 604, note 823) thinks should be understood as something like ‘the highest’. This is to be understood with the latter part of the sentence: ‘become *dhamma*, become *brahma*’ (*dhammabhūta* and *brahmabhūta* respectively). On Walshe’s interpretation, then, this segment should be taken to mean that the *tathāgata* (synonymous with *buddha* more generally: any enlightened being) has ‘become the highest’ due to achievement of liberation via their own efforts. On this reading, the use of ‘*brahma*’ is uncontroversial. Ergardt (1977: 96-97) claims that rather than stating that the awakened has become one with the *Brahman* (see, for example, the usage of *brahmabhūta* at BG 18.54)¹⁶⁴, one that is *brahmabhūta* has become so in virtue of their adherence to the religious lifestyle (Pāli: *brahmacariya*; Skt.: *brahmacarya*). This means that the Buddha and the *arahants*¹⁶⁵ are *brahmabhūta* not because they have melded with the *ātman-Brahman*, but because they fulfil the requirements dictated by the religious lifestyle they lead: they perform their religious duties

¹⁶³ DN 27.9: *Taṃ kissa hetu? Tathāgatassa h’etaṃ Vāseṭṭhā, adhivacanaṃ dhammakāyo iti pi, brahmakāyo iti pi, dhammabhūto iti pi, brahmabhūto iti iti pi.*

¹⁶⁴ BG 18.54:

*brahmabhūtaḥ prasannātmā na śocati na kāṅkṣati / samaḥ sarveṣu bhūteṣu
madbhaktiṃ labhate parām //*

[He who has] become one with the Absolute (*brahmabhūtaḥ*), [who has attained] the serene-nature (*prasannātmā*), [does] not lament nor [does he] desire: [he] is equanimous [towards] all living beings; [he] attains highest devotion to Me.

¹⁶⁵ Skt: *arhat*; in the *Tipiṭaka*, an *arahant* is one that is free from defilements, that is enlightened. This definition gradually evolved to mean different things to different Buddhist schools (particularly upon the advent of the Mahāyāna), but such later developments are peripheral to the point here.

with diligence. Analysing this, Ergardt writes that ‘the obvious qualities of a *life according to dhamma* must be the foundation for the meaning of the word *brahmabhūta*’ (1977: 97).¹⁶⁶

Xing takes a different view, writing that the Buddha appears to be comparing himself to Brahma for effect, writing that in such instances where *brahmakāya* appears ‘[a] parallel is clearly being drawn between a *brāhmaṇa* and a *Sakyaputtīyasamaṇa*, and to indicate that *dhammakāya* is equated to *brahmakāya*’ (2005: 71).¹⁶⁷ Xing further cites Buddhaghoṣa to advance the claim that according to the Theravādins, *dharmakāya/dhammakāya* ‘simply means the teachings of the Buddha’ (2005: 71). This being so, *brahmakāya* is usually understood as ‘the body of *Brahma*’ or the ‘divine body’. We can also understand it as ‘the highest body’. This is, I think, subject to the same sorts of nuance as *dhammakāya* in the contexts of the *Nikāyas*: ‘body’ as a collection or aggregate. It is not obvious to me, then, that Bhattacharya is justified in assuming that the Buddha is equating himself with *Brahmā* for any other purpose than to reason with *Brahmins* in the terminology that they are used to. I contend that at *DN* 29.9, the Buddha simply means that he has become the highest (*brahmabhūta*), become the *dhamma* (*dhammabhūta*), and that the wisdom of the *Tathāgata* constitutes the collected *dharma* (*dhammakāya*), which is the highest collection (*brahmakāya*). It is straightforward enough to see why the Buddha would, when

¹⁶⁶ At least in these Buddhist contexts, for we have already said that *brahmabhūta* has different connotations in Hindu contexts.

¹⁶⁷ In this instance, a *brāhmaṇa* is a Brahmin priest and a *Sakyaputtīyasamaṇa* is a follower of the Buddha. *Sakyaputtīyasamaṇa* translates from the Pāli as something like ‘ascetic [that] belongs to the son of the *Sākyas*’, or ‘monk that follows the Buddha’ (note in Sanskrit that the Buddha is referred to as *Śākyamuni*, ‘sage of the *Sākyas*’).

talking to a *Brahmin*, use this terminology: he equates himself with Brahṁā in order to soften the reluctance of Brahṁā's followers to take on board the *dharma*.

Unsurprisingly, Bhattacharya disagrees with both of the positions outlined above. Whilst he concedes that the aim of the relevant passage is to 'establish the superiority of Dhamma in relation to brahmins' (2015: 124), he goes on to claim that the phrasing at *DN* 27.9 is supposed to be taken in a transcendental sense. That is to say that for Bhattacharya, talk of the Buddha being *dharmakāya* and *dharmabhūta* is to be taken literally – the Buddha *is* the *dharma* in the same way that everything in the world *is* the *ātman-Brahman*. He has become the *dharma* and the *Brahman* in the same way that the liberated Advaitin has become *Brahman*. I think that this is mistaken: *brahmabhūta* can, for example, be translated as 'become pious', 'become highest', 'become the best'. Similarly, *brahmakāya* can, if analysed in a manner similar to *dharmakāya*, simply mean 'the greatest collection (of qualities)'. This is because as I have already said, *kāya* can simply mean 'body' (as in the collection of things constituting a 'body'), whilst *brahma* is frequently used in Buddhist literature as a synonym for 'supreme' (Harvey, 1995: 234).

We are thus left with some relatively uncontroversial and decidedly non-absolutist accounts of words that might otherwise have *prima facie* lent themselves to the Advaitin project. These interpretations are, I feel, more in line with the general understanding of Buddhism at the time of the *Nikāyas*. I have to wonder that if the Buddha had meant to preach the *dharma* as an addendum to the Vedānta, would he not have just said so? Interpreting key terms in this way is entirely plausible, and read in the ways that I have outlined, I contend that these terms need not be imputed with a substantialist interpretation, even if that has clearly been the case across some

Mahāyāna traditions. I reiterate that my argument is not that Bhattacharya is mistaken in noting that some Mahāyāna schools propagate substantialist ideas of an Absolute, it is simply that he is mistaken in asserting that the Mahāyāna does this *in toto*. Madhyamaka when understood by the writings of its founder, Nāgārjuna, should not do so. It is Bhattacharya's position that Madhyamaka should (and indeed does!) endorse such a position, and it is true that parts of the Madhyamaka school do hold such a view: it is present in parts of *tathāgatagarbha* and *prajñāpāramitā* literature, however we choose to interpret it.¹⁶⁸ It is not, however, a necessary conclusion.

5.3 The *Tathāgata* and Ensuing Implications

We can make further sense of the contexts afforded to *dharmakāya* (and, by extension, *dharmasārīra*) if we place them in context with the other attributes assigned to the *Tathāgata* in the *Dīgha Nikāya*. We have already seen that for Bhāvaviveka, the *dharm*-body, *Buddha*-body and *Tathāgata*-body seem to be equivalent. In terms of etymology, Buddhagoṣa outlines eight ways that *tathāgata* might be understood,¹⁶⁹ but it is generally thought that only two of these interpretations are tenable. As such, these two etymologies are the most commonplace in scholarship today. It is to these two interpretations that I now turn. The first compound generally accepted by modern scholarship is that of *tathā* (adverb: thus) + *gata* (past participle of *Vgam*:

¹⁶⁸ Be that as endorsing an Absolute, as graduated teachings according to *upāya* (which would involve teaching things only to later sublimate them with advancing levels of 'truth'), or in some other manner. I suppose that the ambiguity is part of the point: if one interpretation is favoured or intended, we might expect it to be explicit.

¹⁶⁹ Chalmers (1898: 104-105) gives a comprehensive overview of Buddhagoṣa's etymologies. It is not, however, all relevant to my point here, and so I forego the arduous task of replicating and assessing all of what Buddhagoṣa (and, for that matter, Chalmers!) has to say on this.

gone). This interpretation then resolves as *thus-gone*, which sounds pretty but doesn't on the face of things help much. Thus-gone from *what*? Suggestions such as this by John Makransky (2003: 1) state that '*tatha-gato*, meaning "one who has gone thus," who has attained nirvana like all prior buddhas, freed from the conditioned, distorted mentalities and sufferings of mundane existence.' This at least gives us something to work with, but it is cumbersome for a couple of reasons. First, it runs the risk of reifying *nirvāṇa*: the implication here is that the Buddha has 'gone' to his awakening or 'gone' to *nirvāṇa*, which implies that *nirvāṇa* is an ultimate place or plane that is somehow outside of the practitioner and is indeed somewhere to which we are able to 'go'. Lindtner (1997: 116) acknowledges that the notion of *nirvāṇa* as a place to which we can go does seem to have a place in the canonical literature, namely at *DN* 11.88 [PTS *D* i223] and *Udāna* 8.1 and 8.3 [PTS *Ud.* 80].¹⁷⁰ This would be unacceptable to a great many Buddhists, but

¹⁷⁰ *DN* 11.88:

*kattha āpo ca paṭhavī tejo vāyo na gādhati.
kattha dīghañca rassañca aṇuṃ thūlaṃ subhāsubhaṃ,
kattha nāmañca rūpañca asesam uparujjhatīti.*

Tatra veyyākaraṇa bhavatī:

*viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ anantaṃ sabbato pahaṃ
ettha āpo ca paṭhavī tejo vāyo na gādhati
ettha dīghañca rassañca aṇuṃ thūlaṃ subhāsubhaṃ
ettha nāmañca rūpañca asesam uparujjhati.
viññāṇassa nirodhena etthetaṃ uparujjhatīti //*

Ud. 8.1:

*atti bhikkave, tadāyatanaṃ, yattha neva paṭhavī, na āpo, na tejo, na vāyo, na
ākāsānañcāyatanaṃ, na viññānañcāyatanaṃ, na ākiñcaññāyatanaṃ, na
nevasaññānāsaññāyatanaṃ, nāyaṃ loko, na paraloko, na ubho candimasuriyā. Tatrāpāhaṃ
bhikkhave, neva āgatiṃ vadāmi, na gatiṃ, na ṭhitiṃ, na cutiṃ, na upapattiṃ. Appatiṭṭhaṃ
appavattaṃ anārammaṇamevetaṃ. Esevanto dukkhassāti //*

Ud. 8.3:

evaṃ me sutam: ekaṃ samayaṃ bhagavā sāvatthiyaṃ viharati jetavane anāthapiṇḍikassa ārāme. Tena kho pana samayena bhagavā bhikkhū nibbānapaṭisaṃyuttāya dhammiyā kathāya sandasseti samādapeti samuttejeti sampahaṃseti. Te ca bhikkhū aṭṭhi katvā manasi katvāsabbhaṃ cetaso samannāharitva ohitasotā dhammaṃ suṇanti.

atha ko bhagavā etamatthaṃ viditvā tāyaṃ velāyaṃ imaṃ udānaṃ udānesi: atthi bhikkhave, ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṅkhatam. No ce taṃ bhikkhave, abhaviṣṣā ajātaṃ abūtaṃ akataṃ asaṅkhatam, nayidha jātassa bhūtassa katassa saṅkhatassa nissaraṇaṃ paññāyetha //

At DN 11.88, I assume this conclusion has been reached owing to the repeated presence of ‘*ettha*’ (there/here) and ‘*kattha*’ (where) denoting places. In context, they question where the four elements, name and form, and eventually object-based, dualistic consciousness are brought to an end. When this happens, the practitioner experiences *viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ*, a difficult term that is perhaps best translated as ‘non-partaking consciousness’ (non-manifest is also relatively popular). Bhikkhu Sujato (2011) writes in a blog post that the context of this particular extract of the *DN* is often neglected and that far from trying to sneak in some idea of a ‘cosmic consciousness’ (as Bhattacharya would no doubt claim!) or trying to point to a ‘place’ where such discernments cease, the Buddha is instead reformulating the questions asked in order to serve a specific purpose, i.e. to refute the Brahminical positions. On this, Sujato (2011) writes that

the reason for the Buddha’s reformulation of the original question becomes clear. The errant monk had asked where the ending of the four elements was – which is of course the formless attainments. But the Buddha said the question was wrongly put, as this would merely lead beyond the form realm of Brahma to the formless realms. The real question is what lies beyond that, with the cessation of consciousness. It is not enough for matter to be transcended, one must also transcend mind as well. If not, one ends up, apart from all the other philosophical problems, with a mind/body dualism.

If Sujato is right (and it seems to me that his interpretation is entirely plausible), then the Buddha’s rhetoric at DN 11.88 can be sufficiently explained not as endorsing the view that liberation exists somewhere else (i.e. that we literally travel to it), but rather in terms of his replying to specific query regarding Brahma. As Sujato writes, ‘the four material elements cease temporarily in the formless attainments, which is the highest reach of the Brahmanical teachings – even this much Brahma, being a deity of the form realm, did not know’ (2011), and further still, ‘the Buddha’s real teaching is not to temporarily escape materiality, but to reach an ending of suffering. And since all forms of *viññāṇa* (*yaṃ kiñci viññāṇam...*) are said countless times to be suffering, even the infinite consciousness has to go’.

In the case of *Udāna* 8.1, the Buddha speaks of the state, place or dimension (*tadāyatanaṃ*) in which conceptualisation stops. It is, I think, reaching to argue that either of these instances (DN 11.88 or *Ud.* 8.1) really illustrate that the Buddha points to *nirvāṇa* as a place or as a substantial thing whatsoever, especially in the case of *Ud.* 8.1 where the Buddha seems to me to be more concerned with negating lists of things that can be clung to than he is with pointing towards an Absolute. If we choose to translate *tadāyatanaṃ* as (mental) ‘state’ rather than ‘region’ or ‘dimension’, for example, the meaning of the whole passage dramatically changes. I thus follow Ireland, who when listing the possible translations for *tadāyatanaṃ* writes that, ‘Here it [*tadāyatanaṃ*] is not meant in any directional (or temporal) sense’ (1977: 161). Adopting this position allows us the luxury of a more nuanced understanding of the passage, where the Buddha simply wants to illustrate that there is a meditative

especially to Nāgārjuna, with whom my wider argument is primarily concerned. Perhaps we could say that the *tathāgata* has ‘thus-gone’ from the trappings of *saṃsāra*, from the conventional to the ultimate, but this again suggests that upon awakening, there is movement to some place that is fundamentally different to the place occupied by the unawakened, and it involves a claim to the existence of an ‘ultimate’ that Nāgārjuna would find problematic.

But is this a necessary conclusion? We might be able to understand ‘go’ and ‘gone’ in a weaker sense, one that bypasses connotations of ultimacy or of a super-reality into which we are subsumed. This understanding might see us view the ‘thus-gone’ as a person that has ‘gone’ from one understanding of reality to another, more nuanced understanding. This would tally with Ireland’s (1977: 161) argument that usually directional or temporal words such as *tadāyatanam* (translated in numerous ways, usually as ‘region’ or ‘dimension’) – which are present in such places as *Ud.* 8.1 – can be understood as ‘state’. If we translate ‘*tadāyatanam*’ in this manner, then we can say in a weak sense that a Buddhist practitioner can ‘go’ from one understanding of the world to another. In such an instance, a *tathāgata* is somebody that has ‘thus-gone’ from delusion to awakening, but in a very specific way. They have not ‘gone’ to an ultimate plane, nor have they been subsumed into the *ātman-Brahman*. They have simply changed their understanding of the phenomena of the world. Gombrich regards all of the above as ‘fanciful’ (2009: 151), and instead suggests that we understand *tathāgata* as ‘thus-being’, or

state in which conceptualisation ceases without grasping at or endorsing the view that there is a specific ‘place’ in which this occurs. I hope it is becoming obvious by this point that in speaking of some ultimate ‘place’ where something happens, we add discernments, and discernments inevitably lead to reification and so dissatisfaction (sentiments echoed above by Sujato).

‘one who is like that’, which is to say that the *tathāgata* is a certain way, but that it is unable to be sufficiently described (2009: 151).

This is an idea that I think is mirrored in Nāgārjuna’s philosophy. According to his work in the *MMK*, it cannot possibly be the case that we ‘go’ to liberation in any absolutist sense. Instead, it is implied at *MMK* 25.19-20 that the concepts of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are epistemic rather than physical, metaphysical, or otherwise hyperphysical. The interpretation of *tathāgata* as somebody that has ‘gone’ elsewhere (be it a mental plane or somewhere else) appears to tally with the interpretations that characterise *dharmakāya* as a ‘cosmic body’ or as an otherwise existent Absolute to be entered into. Bhattacharya does note that he agrees with Nāgārjuna that the basis of liberation is epistemic and not ontological. He writes that ‘[o]ne who has realized the *ātman* is not outside the world, but he looks upon the world with new eyes’ (2015: 13), and so agrees in principle with the idea that liberation is a matter of outlook and understanding rather than a shift in ontological status. There is still an ontological claim being made, though. Fundamental to Bhattacharya’s outlook is that there is a Real thing that we eventually see clearly, namely the *ātman-Brahman*. We saw in §2 that there are good reasons to believe that early Abhidharma Buddhists would outright reject any notion of a unitary super-reality underpinning existence. We have similarly seen that some schools of thought in the Mahāyāna would indeed interpret *dharmakāya* in absolutist terms – something that Tillemans calls ‘a major philosophical idea in Buddhist scholasticism’ (Tillemans, forthcoming: 6, note 9).’ However, my point is that not *all* Mahāyānists would or should subscribe to this position, despite Bhattacharya’s implications to the contrary (2015: 39). I contend that Nāgārjuna does not (indeed, cannot) hold such a view.

The *MMK* is replete with examples that make monistic, ultimate or Absolute interpretations of key Buddhist terms unlikely if not impossible, but perhaps the most salient in the context of *nirvāṇa* are at *MMK* 25.19-20 and 25.24 given below:

na saṃsārasya nirvāṇāt kiṃ cid asti viśeṣaṇam /
na nirvāṇasya saṃsārāt kiṃ cid asti viśeṣaṇam //19//

nirvāṇasya ca yā koṭiḥ koṭiḥ saṃsāraṇasya ca /
na tayoṛ antaraṃ kiṃ cit susūkṣmam api vidyante //20//

There exists no difference whatsoever between *saṃsāra* and
nirvāṇa /
 There exists no difference whatsoever between *nirvāṇa* and
saṃsāra //19//

The limit of *nirvāṇa* [is the] limit of *saṃsāra* /
 There is not even the subtlest difference between them //20//

sarvopalambhopaśamaḥ prapañcopaśamaḥ śivaḥ /
na kva cit kasyacit dharmo buddhena deśitaḥ //24//

The extinguishing of all cognition, the extinguishing of reification,
 is blissful /
 No *Dharma* [was] ever taught by the Buddha to anyone //24//

If – as it looks here – it is the halting of cognition that characterises *nirvāṇa*, then it does indeed appear to be the case that the *tathāgata* is somebody that has made some sort of mental shift: they have halted reification and thus halted *duḥkha*. Indeed, this point is initially laid out in the *MMK*'s *maṅgalaśloka*, where Nāgārjuna writes that the Buddha taught the benevolent pacification of *prapañca* (*prapañcopaśamaṃ śivam*). This halting of reification, the pacification of conceptual proliferation, is, it seems, the liberated state according to the Mādhyamika: it is a way of being. We might be tempted to construe an Advaitic slant to this. We have already said that Bhattacharya supports the idea that liberation consists in a mental shift, in seeing the world differently rather than in going to a new plane of existence (or other such fantastical notions).

The difference between the position of Nāgārjuna and the position of Bhattacharya is then that Bhattacharya argues that this mental shift occurs in the light of recognising the absolute monism of Reality, in recognising and, in fact *becoming* the *ātman-Brahman* (2015: 21). Nāgārjuna's starting premise is to deny that any such monistic or pluralistic ultimate existence is possible: such an entity requires an intrinsic, immutable nature that Nāgārjuna thinks impossible. The difference in starting points could not be starker! We shall come to see that whilst Bhattacharya declares that '[t]he belief in the existence of an eternal I is folly, but the belief in the non-existence of an I is even greater folly' (2015: 25), Nāgārjuna (*MMK* 18.6) declares that the question itself is folly:

*ātmety api prajñāpitam anātmety api deśitam /
buddhair nātmā na cānātmā kaścid ity api deśitam //6//*

'Self' is disclosed [and] 'not-self' is taught
by *buddhas*: neither 'self' nor 'not-self' is also taught //6//

This seems paradoxical, but there are good reasons for this position. It is not some sort of linguistic trick on behalf of the Mādhyamika. It is a terse statement intended to impress upon the reader that from an ultimate perspective, neither self nor not-self is an appropriate discernment. The key point that overarches even this position is that there can be no ultimate perspective! This might initially sound confusing, but the pedagogical intent is easily analysed. There are many examples of the Buddha conveying his teachings in a manner that could reasonably be said to imply a substantial self (*ātman*) – Siderits and Katsura accurately opine that this is a fact which is 'generally acknowledged' by most Buddhist scholars (2013: 199). This is, we can say, to tailor the Buddha's eventual position toward listeners that might not even have believed in *karma* – if they did not believe in *karma* then it is likely that they had an

underdeveloped sense of moral responsibility. In such cases, it is helpful for the Buddha to foster a provisional belief in *ātman* in order to orientate the listener towards developing their sense of personal responsibility. This would be classed as an example of the Buddha's *upāya*, of his skill-in-means when teaching. He is simply taking the long view: he nurtures an understanding of *ātman* early on so that the listener becomes practitioner. Once listeners become practitioners, they begin their journey towards understanding not-self: a view that aims to cut through the fetters of attachment associated with a strong belief in a substantial self or I.

The basic idea here is that at each step, the Buddha is replacing damaging beliefs with less damaging ones: each view is amended via a process of *sublation* that is facilitated by the Buddha's graduated or progressive teachings. A belief in *ātman* – though misguided – is better than a belief in nothing and an abandonment of virtue. A person that believes in *ātman* will generally believe that their good deeds and bad deeds do not die with them, but will condition their future lives. This, in theory, impels the listener to take responsibility and reorientate their life from a degenerate towards a virtuous existence. Later, the Buddha can teach that this belief is itself misguided, and that belief in a substantial self – although better than degeneracy and belief in nothing at all – is to be abandoned if the practitioner is to make spiritual progress.

Then there are passages that either disregard or outright negate the substantial self. We have seen that Bhattacharya claims at numerous points that the Buddha's apparent disregard of the *ātman* (he never seems to speak about it directly) might be because 'the Upaniṣads had already spoken enough about it' (2015: 37). He claims that the negations of *ātman* present in the canonical Buddhist literature provide a tacit affirmation that 'the Absolute is the sole Reality'

(2015: 35). We might find some support for this position within some Buddhist literature: Bhattacharya specifically appeals to the *Ratnagotravibhāga*.

The *Ratnagotravibhāga* is, as Richard King writes, ‘unique as the only Indian *śāstra* devoted specifically to an exposition of the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine’ (1995: 217). The usual translation of *tathāgatagarbha* is *buddha-nature* or sometimes *buddha-seed*, which should give some insight into what the concept alludes to, viz. the potentiality to become awakened. That Bhattacharya would appeal to such a text is unsurprising given the controversy surrounding the Buddhist literature dealing with *buddha-nature* – there is precedent even within Buddhist schools for the idea to be taken in an absolutist way. As implied in the translation, there is a tendency to associate *buddha-nature* with one of two things. First, with the notion of an embryonic seed contained somewhere within us (or, perhaps, identical with us), a real, actual potential to become enlightened. Secondly, the idea that the *buddha-nature* reflects our natural state, which has simply become obscured by various imperfections and reifications – this is in a similar vein to the *luminous mind* (Skt.: *prakṛtiprabhāsvaracitta*; Pāli: *pabhassaracitta*) referred to by the Buddha in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (1.49-52). This would mean that the *dharmakāya* (which is to be obtained via the removal of defilements) is present all along and is simply uncovered once defilements are removed – this certainly looks to have parallels to the sort of *ātman* that Bhattacharya thinks that Buddhism endorses. Both of these concepts are on these terms amenable to his agenda, though to differing degrees. First, we might think that the idea that we have within us the potential to awaken is an uncontroversial point that any Vedāntin should endorse, for what is the point in Vedāntic practice if one does not gain knowledge of the *ātman-Brahman*? The potential to gain this knowledge must presuppose the act of actually gaining the

knowledge required for liberation: it is there in all of us whether we take the opportunity to realise it or not. This gains additional traction if we understand *buddha*-nature to be identical with sentient beings.¹⁷¹ Whilst Bhattacharya's interpretation appears to have some basis, there is at least one scriptural explanation for the apparent absolutist bent of *tathāgatagarbha* literature such as the *Ratnagotravibhāga*. Eltschinger (2013: 46) translates an extract from the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (78.5-79.9) where the Buddha explains that absolutist teachings in Buddhist literature are not meant to be taken at face value.¹⁷² They are, in fact, different from the teachings of the 'outsiders' (Hindu teachings relating to *ātman* and *Brahman*) because *tathāgatagarbha* is selflessness. Here is part the extract as translated by Eltschinger:

For this reason, O Mahātami, the teaching of the *tathāgatagarbha* differs from the outsiders' teaching of self. Thus by teaching the *tathāgatagarbha*, [the *tathāgatas*] teach (*°upadeśena nirdiśanti*) the *tathāgatagarbha* in order to attract the outsiders who adhere to the doctrine(s) of the self. How indeed could they quickly awaken to the supreme perfect awakening, [those persons] whose thought (*āśaya*) has fallen into the false view [consisting in] the erroneous concept of the self [and] who possess a thought that has fallen from the domain of the three [doors] to liberation? It is for this purpose, O Mahātami, that the *tathāgatas*, *arhats* [and] perfectly awakened ones teach the *tathāgatagarbha*. Therefore,

¹⁷¹ King cites Grosnick (1979: 52): Grosnick argues that "all beings are the garbhas of the Tathagāta," where the *tathāgatagarbha* is a *tatpuruṣa* compound that is the original meaning of the term' (King, 1995: 305). This illustrates that in practice as well as theory, the precise definition of *tathāgatagarbha* is open to debate, though it must also be noted that Grosnick himself strongly resisted the tendency to classify *tathāgatagarbha* as some sort of monistic absolute (King, 1995: 311).

¹⁷² Eltschinger also notes that there is a curious lack of both Buddhist and Hindu sources referring to the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine as endorsing a self (2013: 44). One might expect such a thing to be seized upon by opponents both in rival religious movements and from opponents in rival Buddhist sects: this occurred with the infamous *pudgalavādins*, their doctrine known to other Buddhists as a heresy because it endorsed a sort of *ātman*. It is perhaps telling that there does not seem to be any arguments made from either side that the *tathāgatagarbha* texts are heretical on account of endorsing some sort of *ātman*.

this teaching [of theirs] differs from the outsiders' doctrine(s) of the self. And hence, O Mahātami, you ought to follow selflessness¹⁷³ which is [nothing but] the *tathāgatagarbha* in order to go beyond the outsiders' false view(s).

We can see here that there is more to the *tathāgatagarbha* literature than immediately meets the eye. The claim is that the *tathāgatagarbha* teachings are little more than a device for proselytisation: they are taught to appeal not to Buddhists, but to other religious people for whom inquiry into the nature of *ātman* is liberating. Such a person might read the *tathāgatagarbha* literature and see links between the doctrine they currently adhere to and this form of Buddhism; this might then make it easier for them to convert to Buddhism! Eltschinger summarises thus: '[i]n other words, if the *tathāgatagarbha* teachings are meant as an expedient device aimed at proselytizing the substantialist non-Buddhists, emptiness and selflessness aim at diverting the "converted" from false conceptions of, and excessive attachment to the self' (2013: 51). It can be characterised, then, as an attempt to enhance the middle way.

Such a view can be further supported by an interesting extract from the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, which states that despite appearances, *tathāgatagarbha* teachings do not advance a belief in a permanent *ātman*. Eltschinger (2013: 60) translates from the Tibetan:

If what is called "self" were an eternally permanent (*kūṭasthanitya*) *dharma*, there would be no freedom from suffering (*duḥkha*). And if what is called "self" did not exist, pure religious conduct (*brahmacarya*) would be of no avail [...] It is to be known that the *buddha*-nature is the middle way (*madhyamā pratipat*) altogether free from the two extremes (*antadvaya*) [...] Non-duality is reality: by nature self and not-self are without duality (*gñis su med ma*). The Lord Buddha has thus affirmed that the meaning of the

¹⁷³*nairātmya*; selflessness, impersonality, insubstantiality.

tathāgata is unfathomable [...] In the *Prajñāpāramitā-Sūtra* also I have already taught that self and not-self are without duality by characteristic.

The general thrust of this extract as I read it is that we ought not to cling to notions of self, not-self, both self and not-self, neither self nor not-self. The point is not to cling to such notions at all, not to endorse one or the other over and above one or the other. This clearly ties into Nāgārjuna's whole method, and is, I contend directed not toward the personal *ātman* (*jīva*) or even the *ātman-Brahman*, but simply with the ending of conceptual proliferation (*prapañca*). The idea is not to arrive at knowledge of some ultimately existent substratum akin to the *ātman-Brahman*, but to arrive at a point where we no longer impose conceptualisations on our experience. Non-duality is, I think, to be experienced in meditation; we saw in other sections that this is also the case for Vasubandhu. The whole endeavour then strikes me not as an exercise in ontology, but in epistemology: how ought we to understand the world around us – how should we *think about* and engage with the world around us – if we are to do away with dissatisfaction? I think that this is the crux of the method, and to this end, it is cognate with the other Buddhist methods discussed thus far.

Is, as the above *sūtra* claims, this also the case for the *tathāgatagarbha* and *prajñāpāramitā* literature? Dan Lusthaus offers a short but significant discussion regarding how best to understand the *prajñāpāramitā* and *tathāgatagarbha* literature. The problem as he sees it amounts to two different conceptions of liberation: sudden and gradual. For Lusthaus, the Buddhist traditions that tend toward essentialism (and so the traditions that Bhattacharya would point to in defence of his thesis) do so because their understanding of liberation is one that sees *jñāna* as 'the means or agent for attaining some-thing which in itself is impervious to or

indifferent to the vicissitudes of epistemological approaches, though made accessible through such approaches' (2002: 256). This is the 'sudden' view of liberation, so called because if 'a ready-made transcendental realm already exists, then what is essential about Awakening remains entirely separate from temporal considerations' (2002: 257). There is no necessary unfolding of the process within a temporal timeframe. The *jñāna* required for entry into such a transcendental realm can simply manifest, causing immediate entry into the liberated state. In other words, the right type of intuitive knowledge makes available to us some sort of 'thing' that constitutes the ultimate reality or ultimate truth (or both). Such a thing would, in virtue of its ultimacy, be considered eternal, immutable, and intrinsically existent. This obviously would apply to the *ātman-Brahman*, but it can as we have seen also apply – though not necessarily – to Buddhist concepts like the *dharmakāya*. Particular knowledge would then unlock access to this ultimately existent thing and provide liberation.

This stands in contrast to a gradual process, which sees *jñāna* acquired over the course of what amounts to the *Bodhisattva* path. In such an account, Lusthaus argues that there occurs 'a progressional unfolding that never posits anything apart from the process itself' (2002: 257). In other words, there is not any 'realm' of the enlightened, nor is there an essential, permanent feature of awakening. Instead, there is simply a temporal process of Buddhist praxis; we practice, gradually 'awaken', and then act in the world according to the *jñāna* that we have acquired via this same gradual process. I think of the difference in very simple terms: for essentialists, liberation is ontological. It involves 'entry' to some eternal state, a ready-made realm. For progressionalists, liberation is epistemological. *Prajñā* is that which brings about a *mental change*, and this change informs how we interact with the world. If we interact without grasping,

without imposition and appropriation, we might be said to be awakened. As Lusthaus writes, in such a state, '[i]mpermanence (e.g., in terms of *rūpa*) continues unabated, but it is now *upekṣa*, i.e., no longer experienced as loss. *Amata* [deathless, deathlessness] is thus an epistemic change, not ontological' (2002: 265).¹⁷⁴ Understood in this manner, *prajñāpāramitā* literature does not endorse an *ātman-Brahman*, because such an endorsement requires not only an epistemological aspect, but also an ontological? aspect: everything *is Brahman*! Similarly, *tathāgatagarbha* literature can simply be understood as endorsing the mental potential to gain the relevant insight to overcome *duḥkha*. It need not necessitate an Absolute into which we meld, or about which we gain *gnosis*. It is, as Lusthaus (2005: 255) writes, the 'active functioning of one's potential for Buddhahood.' It can be no more and no less than this. It would seem very odd to view our potential as residing in an Absolute, or indeed to view it as the Absolute itself.

It seems clear to me, then, that whilst some Buddhist sects have indeed interpreted both *tathāgatagarbha* and *prajñāpāramitā* literature to have essentialist, absolutist ends, such conclusions need not be a necessary outcome of the literature's analysis. In the preceding

¹⁷⁴ Lusthaus (2002: 265) makes a compelling argument that the early Buddhist goal of becoming '*amata*' (deathless) be understood in the following way:

To be undying means to not arise, to not arise means 'unborn' (*anutpāda*) in the sense of not constrained by conditioning, not condemned to habitually repeat previous experience, to have one's experience determined by the moment by moment 'arising of conditions' (*utpāda*). "I don't die" means (1) there is no self which undergoes death (but this is strictly formulaic, not existential), and (2) it connotes *asaṃskṛta*, in the sense that Chinese translated that term, viz. *wu-wei*, i.e., the non-conditioned spontaneity and freedom of *tzu-jan*. Further, it meant to not suffer loss due to impermanence, to remain unaffected by loss and gain. Impermanence (e.g., in terms of *rūpa*) continues unabated, but it is now *upekṣa*, i.e., no longer experienced as loss. *Amata* is thus an epistemic change, not ontological.

section, I have outlined some alternative ways of understanding key terms that lend themselves to reification as synonyms for a Buddhist Absolute. The crux of the matter involves eschewing ontological concerns in favour of epistemological ones. It is by doing this that I think that we can make sense of what are some challenging, difficult themes in challenging, seemingly inconsistent texts. If we interpret the more controversial aspects of the literature in these ways, it seems clear to me that we must deny that the resulting conclusions endorse any sort of ontological Absolute. Bhattacharya's interpretations that contend that Mahāyāna Madhyamaka, Yogācāra, *tathāgatagarbha*, and *prajñāpāramitā* literature lead to a Buddhist endorsement of the *ātman-Brahman* are then rejected.

§6: Nāgārjuna's Approach

We have seen thus far that if we interpret aspects of the Mahāyāna in certain ways, there is no need to arrive at a conception of an Absolute underpinning and running through our experienced reality. That is to say, interpreted in the ways in which I have outlined, there are good reasons to doubt Bhattacharya's thesis that Mahāyāna philosophies result in endorsement of the *ātman-Brahman* as the material and efficient cause of the world. Nāgārjuna has played a role throughout the previous discussion, but only partially and relatively fleetingly. My next task, then, is to assess whether or not Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* can be read in such a way as to endorse the *ātman-Brahman*.

The claim by Bhattacharya is, as we have seen, that *śūnyatā* – Nāgārjuna's principal philosophical tool – is the *ātman-Brahman* (2015: 13). The argument for this is principally that because the *ātman-Brahman* is ultimately beyond characterisation, beyond attributes, and impersonal, then Nāgārjuna's arguments in the *MMK* that conclude with the impersonality and emptiness (of intrinsic nature) of all phenomena is, in effect, an argument for the *ātman-Brahman*. Mādhyamikas disagree, often claiming that this is to misconstrue emptiness, and also to overstate the case: Nāgārjuna simply doesn't make any claims of his own!

David Burton, however, takes the view that Nāgārjuna does indeed make claims of his own. His point is that Nāgārjuna *must* make a knowledge claim regarding how things really are whenever he talks about *śūnyatā* (1999: 37). In other words, if Nāgārjuna is claiming that all phenomena are empty of intrinsic existence (*svabhāva*), then he is making some sort of claim about the workings of the world. The interesting thing here is the way Burton characterises

Nāgārjuna's claims. For Burton, the knowledge-claim made by Nāgārjuna can be characterised in two distinct ways. First, we can understand *śūnyatā* as an ultimate truth that accurately corresponds to an ultimate reality; in other words, it is *the true nature* of phenomena to *lack intrinsic nature*. If *śūnyatā* is an ultimate reality, we can make a link with the claim advanced by Bhattacharya that it is the nature of the world to be impersonal.

Second, Burton refers to a different sort of understanding that dictates that 'one knows that one does not know and cannot know how things actually are' (1999: 37), which we might in turn characterise as viewing *śūnyatā* as an inexpressible thing that is ultimately beyond our understanding. On either of these views, the claimant is obviously making some sort of assessment regarding how the world actually is – they are either claiming that there is an underlying nature, *śūnyatā*, or they are claiming that we cannot know if there is an underlying nature.

The focus of this point for Burton is Nāgārjuna's relatively controversial claim at *MMK* 13.8 that those for whom emptiness is a 'view' are incurable.¹⁷⁵ Burton contends that contrary to some prominent interpretations (see Siderits & Katsura, 2013: 145), a person is *not* 'incurable' simply in virtue of taking *śūnyatā* as some sort of metaphysical view. On this reading, the positions outlined above – mere knowledge claims, taking emptiness as a view in a weakened

¹⁷⁵*MMK* 13.8: *śūnyatā sarvadṛṣṭināṃ proktā niḥsaraṇaṃ jinaiḥ / yeṣāṃ tu śūnyatādṛṣṭis tān asādhyaṇ babhāṣire //*

We can understand this as something like 'emptiness is declared by the conquerors [as the] remedy to remove all views. But those for whom emptiness is a view are said [to be] incurable.' It is with what actually constitutes taking emptiness as a view that Burton is here concerned.

sense – are not the issue at hand for Nāgārjuna. Instead, Burton argues that to become ‘incurable’ is to specifically fall ‘into either of the two extremes of nihilism or essentialism’ (1999: 37). The nihilist would simply take emptiness to mean that no entities exist. Burton writes that according to his view, the nihilist would believe that no entities whatsoever exist rather than the more subtle claim that no entities *with svabhāva* exist (1999: 37).

On this first account, Nāgārjuna is a nihilist if he denies outright that any entities exist; a position that he ostensibly does not appear to advance.¹⁷⁶ Nevertheless, Burton will indeed conclude that the logical conclusion of Nāgārjuna’s philosophy is nihilism, whether he intended it or not.¹⁷⁷ Of course, if Nāgārjuna is indeed a nihilist, then Bhattacharya’s argument fails – at least if we adhere specifically to Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka as found in his writings rather than to later adaptations and evolutions of the school as found elsewhere. After all, how might Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka assert or endorse an Absolute if nothing at all exists?

For Burton, the emptiness-eternalist has two possible roads that they might traverse: gross eternalism and subtle eternalism. The gross eternalist misunderstands *śūnyatā* as an unchanging, ultimately existent Absolute. Burton surmises that given Nāgārjuna’s assertion at

¹⁷⁶ But also a conclusion that would preclude him from advancing any sort of support for or belief in the *ātman-Brahman*!

¹⁷⁷ This conclusion is first outlined in Burton’s introduction, where he writes that ‘I believe that the knowledge-claim that all entities lack *svabhāva* entails nihilism’ (1999: 4). Giuseppe Ferraro also advanced this thesis in his 2013 paper, *A Criticism of M. Siderits and J. L. Garfield’s ‘Semantic Interpretation’ of Nāgārjuna’s Theory of Two Truths*. Ferraro later adapted his position to argue that Nāgārjuna is not a nihilist, but rather occupies a realist anti-metaphysical position. This position, thinks Ferraro, ‘seems to hinder and prevent the possibility of any nihilistic interpretation of Nāgārjuna’ (2017: 73).

MMK 25.19 that there is no difference between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, this grossly Absolutist view is obviously false. It could be the case, though, that ‘*nirvāṇa* is the true nature of cyclic existence, viz. its absence of *svabhāva*, rather than being a non-dependently originating Absolute Reality which is separate from the dependently originating world’ (1999: 38).¹⁷⁸ Subtle eternalism, opines Burton, could mean that whilst ‘emptiness means entities dependently originate, it might not be understood that emptiness also means that dependently originated entities are one and all conceptual constructs’ (1999: 38). Burton’s concern looks to be that the ‘incurable’ practitioner fails to realise that all dependently originated phenomena are in fact conceptual constructs. He elsewhere claims that conceptual constructs have no foundational existence (*dravyasat*) (1999: 35), and so I think his point is that a Buddhist could feasibly hold the opinion that *śūnyatā* is equivalent with *pratītyasamutpāda* but simultaneously assign some sort of real existence to the dependently originated entities that they encounter.¹⁷⁹ This would not be too dissimilar to the Sarvāstivādin *dharma* theory insofar as it allows for *pratītyasamutpāda* but only if the entities that dependently originate are reducible down to immutable, ultimately existent *dharmas*.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ Thus, it seems that for Burton, the idea that a Madhyamaka Absolute might be equivalent with the Advaitin *ātman-Brahman* is fundamentally flawed: one would need to be characterised by a lack of any *svabhāva*, whereas the other is characterised by a substantial existence (thus a *svabhāva*).

¹⁷⁹ Though Nāgārjuna does initially appear to equate *śūnyatā* with *pratītyasamutpāda* at MMK 24.18, the following line adds a caveat, namely that *śūnyatā* is a dependent concept (*prajñapti*). This is to say that emptiness is not equivalent with dependent origination because they are the same thing, but to say that emptiness follows from dependent origination: it is an example of its operation (Siderits & Katsura, 2013: 278).

¹⁸⁰ This reduction is said to preserve the principle of *pratītyasamutpāda* because all phenomena dependently originate based upon the basic *dharmas*, i.e. all experienced things dependently originate as a result of interactions of *dharmas*; all phenomena dependently originate *apart from* the *dharmas*.

Talk of a ‘true nature of cyclic existence’ is interesting, because it implies that the idea that we have of said nature is currently false. Burton’s claim is that the misunderstanding that a gross emptiness-eternalist might hold could be one that acknowledges that the *svabhāva* view is false and contends that the impersonal *niḥsvabhāva* (lacking intrinsic existence) conception of *nirvāṇa* is actually the true nature of reality. This is problematic for Nāgārjuna because what is in effect occurring is that the practitioner is, in their zeal to deny *svabhāva*, simply replacing it with another reified concept under which nothing falls (*śūnyatā*). The effect is a straightforward substitution of one ‘real’ nature with another sort of ‘real’ nature, which is by Nāgārjuna’s analysis both undesirable and impossible. Nāgārjuna would, it seems to me, prefer to do away with the idea of ‘real’ natures *in toto*, viewing them as nothing more than reifications. It is in this sense that scholars often interpret Nāgārjuna as having ‘no thesis’ – it is not that he wants to state how things ultimately *are*; he wants to dispel any such idea. In order to try to achieve this, Nāgārjuna then states instead how things *are not*. It is clear how the objections brought earlier by Bhattacharya might also be brought by Burton: in saying how things *are not*, Nāgārjuna is at the very least implying how things are. We have seen that the idea is that there can be no negation without that which is to be negated. I think that this point would carry more weight if it could be demonstrated that Nāgārjuna is actually interested in defending any sort of metaphysic, but it seems to me that Nāgārjuna is in the business of removing metaphysics from the discourse (owing to its potential for reification). In such a scenario, we might want to claim that Nāgārjuna is less concerned with providing an account of the world as it is, and more concerned with analysing the world as it appears to us and as we interact with it. After all,

Nāgārjuna at no point denies that we experience and interact with a ‘reality’, he only denies that we can think of it in essentialist, substantial terms (i.e. in terms of *svabhāva*).

Nevertheless, Burton is suspicious of the ‘no-thesis’ position attributed to Madhyamaka. It is the case, for example, that Nāgārjuna gives what we are to assume is an exhaustive account of (ultimate) origination at *MMK* 1.1:

*na svato nāpi parato na dvābhyāṃ nāpy ahetutaḥ /
utpannā jātu vidyante bhāvāḥ kva cana ke cana //1//*

Not from itself, not from another, not from both, nor without
cause:

Never in any way is there any existing thing that has arisen //1//

I think that Burton is certainly correct when he says that this account of origination has a specific aim in mind, namely to illustrate that ‘entities with *svabhāva* do not originate in any of these four ways’ (1999: 40). The way in which Nāgārjuna makes these claims, thinks Burton, means that Nāgārjuna is not a sceptic. Nāgārjuna is emphatically arguing that ultimate entities *do not* originate in this manner; he thinks that the evidence available to us when we analyse the world logically proves to us that this is the case. For Burton, this is not the position of a sceptic.¹⁸¹ I make the point, however, that Nāgārjuna’s claims about how things are not (that entities with *svabhāva* do not originate in this way; that entities with *svabhāva* could not originate whatsoever (*MMK* 1.13-14)) might not fall under the scope of ultimate truth. Indeed there are those that hold the position that we are not entitled to infer anything at all from Nāgārjuna’s negations. So

¹⁸¹ I mentioned earlier that according to Mohanta (1997: 53), and by drawing on Ayer (1956: 40), Nāgārjuna *can* be characterised as a specific type of sceptic: a cognitive sceptic.

much of Nāgārjuna's writings depend on a nuanced understanding of the differences between the scopes of conventional and ultimate truths that it would be folly merely to assume that any apparent knowledge claims – whatever they might be – ought to be automatically treated as ultimate claims describing how things really are. Ferraro recently published a novel take on this, arguing that Nāgārjuna's philosophy as presented in the *MMK* and *VV* is realistic 'insofar as it acknowledges – in line with the Buddha's position – the existence of a reality in itself' (2017: 79). This reality could in principle be the object of an 'ultimate' cognitive experience, or to phrase it slightly differently, this reality could be the object of the epistemic transformation that Nāgārjuna's writings direct us towards.

Ferraro's reading here seems uncontroversial – given that Nāgārjuna spends so much time arguing against immutable intrinsic natures in favour of radical change (to facilitate *pratītyasamutpāda* and thus the Buddhist path generally), I think it relatively straightforward that Nāgārjuna acknowledges some sort of reality (and so is not a nihilist in the way argued by scholars such as Burton (2001)). His problem then is not with the fact that we experience a reality and operate within it, but rather with how we interact, analyse and deal with the reality in front of us. It is not that he denies that we operate in this world, but rather that he denies that we operate in a *specific conception* of this world, viz. the world consisting of immutable, permanent, intrinsically existent (with *svabhāva*) *dharma*s. Such a vision of the world is, on Nāgārjuna's interpretation, imposed onto the world by us as a result of uncritical cognition.¹⁸² It is then an

¹⁸² Throughout the *MMK* and at certain points in the *VV* (some translated and discussed in this work), Nāgārjuna laments that we impose onto the world the views that we experience various types of existence or nonexistence.

issue of epistemology rather than one of ontology – Nāgārjuna’s anti-metaphysical bent suggests, I think, that he is really in the business of preventing us imposing a metaphysic onto the world that we experience, and this is very simply because doing so breeds attachment (to *dṛṣṭi*; views, specifically metaphysical views). Thus, counter-intuitive as it might seem, Nāgārjuna is arguing that we ought not to impose any notions that might claim to account for how the world *ultimately* is (viz. *svabhāva*). Burton would say that this is still a knowledge-claim, because it at least implies how the world *ultimately is not* (without *svabhāva*). It is, but it is a knowledge-claim of specific and limited scope. Nāgārjuna – if my reading is correct – wants to deny both the possibility and utility of describing an ultimate state of affairs. The knock-on effect of this is that in the end, it is pointless to discuss an ultimate state of affairs, and so whilst talk of an ultimate might in some instances be a simple pedagogical device (*upāya*), it is to be eventually abandoned as another example of *dṛṣṭi* that insidiously breeds attachment.

Indeed, Ferraro opines that Nāgārjuna’s philosophy ‘is rigorously antimetaphysical to the extent that it opposes (again in tune with at least one dimension of the Buddha’s teaching) any attempt to define reality, that is, to project any *dṛṣṭi* on it or, in other words, to construct any possible metaphysics’ (2017: 80). This is the case despite his realist view of the world, i.e. his view that there is some reality within which we operate, and that we can change our outlook

For example, imposing a *svabhāva* view is an example of holding a *dṛṣṭi*. Similarly, imposing *śūnyatā* onto the world as an existent thing (*bhava*) is also a *dṛṣṭi*. The point, then, is to remove and avoid any further *dṛṣṭi*!

within this reality to become awakened/liberated.¹⁸³ The point then is that we do not impose anything onto the world. We instead ‘empty’ it of definitions in order to avoid constructing and imposing *dṛṣṭi*. Nevertheless, Ferraro has a nuanced take on what constitutes ‘ultimate truth’. He writes that the process of ‘emptying’ has no definitional content in relation to ‘ultimate truth’, and this is precisely because the concept emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and the process that it entails are intended not to give an account of reality, but to remove any *dṛṣṭi* (2017: 80). Ferraro qualifies this in his footnotes, stating that

[according to this reading] the word *satya* in the locution *paramārthasatya* does not qualify the characteristic of a true statement (or belief), that is, a statement that corresponds to a *real* state of things. Indeed, *paramārthasatya* is not a specific representation of some particular state of things. Rather, it is the (general) way *buddhas* see reality: a way that certainly corresponds to how reality is in itself, but that does not equate to a specific statement or a series of statements.

(2017: 80, note 33)

In other words, Ferraro’s argument is that Nāgārjuna understands *paramārthasatya* (absolute truth; the highest truth) in a specific way – a way that differs in a radical way from that understanding to which other Buddhist schools adhere. On this reading, Nāgārjuna interprets

¹⁸³ Ferraro specifies that in his view, Nāgārjuna presupposes that reality exists and that we operate within it. He does not, however, go any further than that by, for example, aiming to give an ultimate account of the way that reality *actually is*:

Accepting a broad definition of ‘metaphysics’ (as the one GS probably have in mind) we should therefore distinguish between a metaphysics₁, which simply presupposes that reality exists, and a metaphysics₂, which offers some kind of definition of reality itself. On this basis, my interpretation is that in Nāgārjuna we only find a metaphysics₁ and a rejection of all forms of metaphysics₂.

(2014: 453)

paramārthasatya as a general way of being, the result of the shift in cognition that occurs once a practitioner has successfully employed the concept of *śūnyatā* to empty out their conventional experience (this necessarily includes ‘emptying’ emptiness so as not to reify it as a *dr̥ṣṭi*!).¹⁸⁴ This reading also equates *paramārthasatya* with *nirvāṇa* (2014: 459; 2017: 79-80); we know that Nāgārjuna asserted that there is no difference between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* at *MMK* 25.19, and so I think that Ferraro is correct in arguing that the distinction – insofar as there is one to be made – is one of epistemology and not ontology. By this, I mean that if I read Ferraro correctly, then his understanding of Nāgārjuna tallies with my own understanding of *MMK* 25.19: there is no ontological difference between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* precisely because Nāgārjuna believes the following two things. First, that we should not think of the world in terms of metaphysics because it actively hinders our soteriological aims – this includes taking emptiness as a view (reification of a *dr̥ṣṭi*). Second, liberation consists in *thinking differently about the world*, not in there being a (meta)physical *change in the world*. The world is how the world is; Nāgārjuna sees no change in it from when we are in the throes of delusion to when we are awakened, nor does he feel any urge to impose upon the world some sort of metaphysic. The change must consequently be internal and cognitive.

¹⁸⁴ It is also the case that *saṃvṛtisatya* (conventional truth) is not a ‘specific true expression’ of reality; it is instead a ‘cognitive approach or an epistemic level’ that is common to unenlightened people: put very simply, the difference between conventional truth and ultimate truth is ‘a general way of seeing things’ (Ferraro, 2017: 80, note 33). This sort of understanding allows for a similarity between the Advaitin method and that of the Mādhyamika: liberation consists in a change of outlook. There is still a significant point of divergence, however, and that is where the Mādhyamika has ‘emptied’ any *dr̥ṣṭi*, the Advaitin still holds at least one: the ultimate is a substantial entity; it is the *ātman-Brahman*.

On Ferraro's reading, then, emptiness is not to be reified as a metaphysical view *whatsoever* – a position slightly different from Burton's, who as we have already said thinks that to take emptiness as a view is to treat emptiness specifically as a form of eternalism or nihilism. For Burton it looks as though treating emptiness 'metaphysically' is not in itself an issue. Ferraro, it seems, makes the more fundamental claim that emptiness is not to be imposed as a view (*drṣṭi*) at all and in any circumstance.¹⁸⁵ It is to be utilised and then disregarded. I do not think that Ferraro's reading necessitates that Nāgārjuna violate his 'no-thesis' maxim in any significant way. Whilst Nāgārjuna must invariably hold that there is some reality and that there is some way of thinking about and engaging with it, he emphatically rejects the idea that we should hold any *drṣṭi* about that reality or the ways in which we interact with it. I submit that this is where the no-thesis maxim really applies: it is a soteriological tool aimed at removing impositions onto reality. When Nāgārjuna claims that he has no thesis to pursue, he really means that he has no horse in the metaphysical race; that he has no metaphysical thesis outside of that which states we ought not to have a metaphysical thesis! He thinks, then, that we can be in the world and navigate the world without the imposition of any metaphysic: this is the point of Nāgārjuna's method.

6.1 Madhyamaka Metaphysics

Burton thinks that one problematic mystical interpretation of Nāgārjuna sees him trying to explain the inexpressible through verbal expression. The idea is that while we cannot say

¹⁸⁵ To wit, whereas Burton supposes that there is a certain *type* of metaphysical view that Nāgārjuna warns against, Ferraro takes the more foundational stance that Nāgārjuna opposes any metaphysical view (*drṣṭi*) at all.

anything of the ultimate, we can speak in conventional terms to try to orient ourselves toward the ultimate: recall that this is the role of scripture according to Śaṅkara and is a tactic employed by a great many mystics as outlined in §1. Burton further pushes this point when he claims that Nāgārjuna ‘must be saying, at least, that it is necessary to rely on these [conventional] teachings to come to know ultimate truth’ (1999: 80). This is not too controversial a position: indeed it is shared by esteemed Madhyamaka scholar Jay L. Garfield.¹⁸⁶ As regards Burton’s first point, it is not clear to me that Nāgārjuna does attempt to give an account of the inexpressible. Further, it is not clear to me that he really *wants to*. I think that Ferraro is, on balance, right when he writes that despite the ultimate being described by Nāgārjuna at *MMK* 18.9 as not proliferated by proliferations (*prapañcair aprapañcitam*), non-conceptual (*nirvikalpam*), and undifferentiated (*anānā-artham*), this does not mean that the ultimate is ineffable – instead, it just means that it is different from the conventional. Further, the descriptions of the ultimate here all hinge on cognitive awareness: not proliferated by proliferations, not cognised via concepts,¹⁸⁷ not differentiated and so on. Following Ferraro’s argument, these negations (not x, not y) merely state that the awakened see things *not* in terms of the conventional (which *is* populated by proliferations, which is full of reification, which does rely on conceptual thought). We have already said that we are not entitled to infer from these negations anything about what the

¹⁸⁶ Garfield writes that ‘the understanding of ultimate truth is in an important sense the understanding of the nature of the conventional truth’ (Garfield, 1995: 299), hinting at the contingency of the ultimate on the conventional – to understand the ultimate, we must understand the conventional.

¹⁸⁷ The term *vikalpa* can be problematic insofar as there are questions around how we might cognise something *sans*-concepts. This is an area of debate to which no justice can be done in the space available here, and so I shall not attempt to answer this most complex of questions.

ultimate is really like. Consequently, Ferraro sums up Nāgārjuna's approach thus: '[o]nce again, the negations should be interpreted in the *prasajya* fashion, and do not suggest a metaphysics counterposed to the one that is rejected' (2017: 54). The negations present in the writing of Nāgārjuna, then, should not be taken to imply anything further. This is contrary to the interpretations of both Bhattacharya (2015: 36) and Murti (2016: 234-235), and is contra the position offered above by Burton. If Ferraro is correct about Nāgārjuna's intention (and it seems to me that his interpretation of Nāgārjuna is at least plausible), then Burton's concern is unwarranted. Nāgārjuna simply does not offer any sort of description of an ineffable Absolute – he is in fact chiefly concerned with the removal of descriptive content. Madhyamaka philosophy then is decidedly unconcerned with any account of a mystical metaphysic, and there can consequently be no Madhyamaka account of a mystical experience. If the *raison d'être* of Madhyamaka philosophy is indeed to remove any *dṛṣṭi* then there is simply no reason to think that Nāgārjuna is ever concerning himself with characterising some ultimate reality, and because of this, Nāgārjuna is not a mystic.

Now to the second point. I remain unconvinced that Nāgārjuna must commit himself to using conventional truths to understand ultimate truths. It seems to me that Nāgārjuna simply recognises that in terms of a soteriology (and let us not forget that Buddhism is at top and bottom a soteriology before all else), imposing the idea of a metaphysical 'ultimate' onto the world is counter-productive. He thinks that getting rid of essentialist ideas is what equates to liberation from suffering. This is an epistemic process rather than an ontological one. So, is Nāgārjuna really saying that understanding conventional truth *x* will lead to understanding ultimate truth *y*? I think that the question itself is mistaken, as I shall now explain.

If we accept the claims that ultimate and conventional truths do not provide a ‘specific true expression’ of the content of ‘reality’ (whatever that might turn out to be), we are left with the somewhat surprising notion that Nāgārjuna does not really want to describe reality at all. What he actually wants is to describe the ways in which we tend to *engage* with reality as-it-is, and then illustrate how one way is more expedient than the others are if we hope to achieve liberation from dissatisfaction and suffering. This means that Nāgārjuna is not much concerned with describing the world, but with describing how we respond to it psychologically. To this end, Nāgārjuna is making some sort of knowledge-claim, but it is not about reality per se (which is assumed but never really detailed); it is instead about how we *think about* reality. Nāgārjuna thinks that the knowledge he has is in relation to enlightenment, not in relation to the nature of reality. If liberation is a cognitive shift that allows a certain way of seeing things, then it is enough for Nāgārjuna to account for this psychologically over and above accounting for ‘reality’, which is simply assumed. Emptiness is thus a tool for ridding our minds of these insidious essentialist thought processes that ascribe *svabhāva* to phenomena and thus impose a metaphysics onto the world. And yet we would be just as wrong to suppose that emptiness facilitates a lack of being in a given phenomenon. Ascribing *svabhāva* is to fall into eternalism, for we have already said that *svabhāva* actually ‘is’ that which possesses it. It is the fundamental nature of a given phenomenon, immutable and permanent. Denying it outright is useful for a person caught up in essentialist traps, but it is not the full story. A denial of *svabhāva* is also undesirable – we can easily fall into the trappings of nihilism, as many Madhyamaka detractors have continually pointed out. What then should our final position be?

Ferraro writes that

the mere position (or presupposition) of an ultimate reality (accessible to the *buddhas*) cannot be considered a form of substantialism or reificationism. Indeed, according to this reading, phenomena are just conventionally real, without any ontic referent or substantiality; the very reality in itself could also not be considered a substance or something endowed with the attribute of existence. In fact, the non-implicative (*prasajya*) nature of Nāgārjuna's negations prevents us from inferring the substantiality of ultimate reality from the negation of substantiality of conventional reality. Actually, the category of being does not qualify the *tattva-paramārtha* any more than the category of non-being (or the combination or the lack of being and non-being).

(2017: 81)

Ferraro seems to be arguing that on Nāgārjuna's account, the reality we experience does not require any substantiality. That is to say that we do not *need* that reality to exist via *svabhāva* or some other substance that is *svabhāva* in all but name – this is what Nāgārjuna spends so much time denying. It is Nāgārjuna's opinion that imposing such essentialist ideas onto phenomena is simply to propagate attachment via *dṛṣṭi*. In turn, this hinders our progress towards liberation. With such a notion in mind, we might wonder what use talking of the conventional and ultimate really is. If Nāgārjuna's philosophical method should be understood as a concerted effort to remove any possible *dṛṣṭi* (and I think that it should), then speaking of a conventional and ultimate way of seeing things might contradict this aim. Ferraro makes the point that the difference between the conventional and ultimate is 'a general way of seeing things' (Ferraro, 2017: 80, note 33), and so I hazard that for Ferraro, this general way of seeing things need not have any particular metaphysical import.

Nevertheless, there is a question to be answered here. Another part of the semantic interpretation is concerned with reification of positions, specifically with reification of the idea of an ‘ultimate truth’ (and so ultimate reality). Indeed, Siderits’ famous (and much contested) slogan is ‘the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth’ (Siderits, 2016: 24). This requires a little unpacking, and I will do this as we go along. First, an obvious point: if the ultimate truth is that there *is no* ultimate truth, then this thesis appears to run counter to that of Ferraro. We have seen that Ferraro thinks that there *is* some sort of ultimate, and it is characterised by a change in the way we exist in the world. Can these two positions be reconciled? I think there might be a ‘middle way’.

The scope of the semantic interpretation of emptiness can be summarised as follows: *śūnyatā* is, when interpreted semantically, a principle concerned not with the nature of the world, but with the nature of truth. Siderits writes that ‘[s]pecifically, it takes the claim that all things are empty to mean that the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth – there is only conventional truth’ (2003: 11). The strongest defence of this position is, I think, at *MMK* 25.24, a short but significant line that would be easily missed if we did not recognise its context:

*sarvopalambhopaśamaḥ prapañcopaśamaḥ śivaḥ /
na kva cit kasyacit dharmo buddhena deśitaḥ //24//*

The extinguishing of all cognition, the extinguishing of reification,
is blissful /
No *Dharma* [was] ever taught by the Buddha to anyone //24//

This is taken from the chapter entitled ‘Analysis of Nirvāṇa’, which Nāgārjuna thinks is itself neither existent nor ‘an absence’ (*abhāva*; nonexistent). We know that the Buddha did indeed teach the *Dharma*, and so does Nāgārjuna: he ends his *magnum opus* by offering

salutations to the Buddha, whom Nāgārjuna thinks taught the ‘true *Dharma*’ (*saddharma*) to terminate all views (*sarvadṛṣṭiprahāṇāya*)! There must then be something else going on in this seemingly innocuous *kārikā*. I think that Nāgārjuna is thinking here in terms of the ultimate; if there is no possibility of *svabhāva* and thus no possibility of an eternal, immutable character or identity (or, indeed, *ātman*), then the *Dharma* of the Buddha is contingent. It is contingent in the sense that its arising relies on causes and conditions, and that its continued ‘existence’ is reliant on yet more causes and conditions.¹⁸⁸ These causes and conditions are simple enough to conceive; the *Dharma* is taught because there are unenlightened minds attaching themselves to and grasping at things; they labour under existential dissatisfactions. The continued existence of these unenlightened minds means that the *Dharma* endures (conventionally), and once a mind becomes enlightened, there is no need for the *Dharma* to exist: owing to its dependent origins, should every mind become enlightened, the *Dharma* – like all other phenomena – would perish. In these ways, the *Dharma* is dependently originated and exists only conventionally. Accordingly, the truth of the *Dharma* as a tool to reach liberation is also thoroughly dependent and so conventional. It has no innate character, no eternal, intrinsic existence, and so ‘no [permanent, ultimately existent] *Dharma* was ever taught by the Buddha to anyone’. In other words, the *Dharma* is not ultimately existent and so not ultimately true. It is *conventionally* existent and so *conventionally* true, and it is useful only as long as there are deluded minds to liberate; its truth is contingent on these minds and their deluded states.

¹⁸⁸ I am here using ‘existence’ in a conventional manner. That is to say that I do not mean to imply that the *Dharma* is *ultimately existent*.

6.2 Why Posit Conventionality and Ultimacy?

We might again wonder what the point of distinguishing between the conventional and ultimate is to Nāgārjuna. It holds some significance, because he claims at *MMK* 24.9 that anybody that does not understand the distinction between the two truths does not understand the *Dharma* as taught by the Buddha!¹⁸⁹ We have seen some wrangling by Ferraro and Burton around this question, but neither provide a fully satisfactory account. Siderits and Katsura (2013: 272-273) suggest two ways in which the distinction between conventional and ultimate might be understood. The first is borrowed from Candrakīrti, and understands ‘conventional’ to mean something along the lines of ‘customary practices of the world’ (2013: 272). *Samvṛti* is thus ‘of the nature of (the relation between) term and referent, cognition and the cognized, and the like’ (2013: 272), which means that conventionality is simply normal, everyday relations between semantic and cognitive aspects; between words and their associated cognitive ‘objects’.¹⁹⁰ The

¹⁸⁹ *MMK* 24.9 thus reads:

*dve satye samupāśritya buddhānām dharmadeśanā /
lokasaṃvṛtisatyam ca satyam ca paramārthataḥ //8//
ye ‘nāyor vijānti vibhāgaṃ satyayor dvayoḥ /
te tattvaṃ na vijānanti gambhīre buddhaśāsane //9//*

The *Dharma*-instruction of the Buddha rests on two truths:
conventional truth and ultimate truth //8//
[Those] who do not know the distinction between the two truths,
they do not understand the Buddha’s profound teaching //9//

¹⁹⁰ They are ‘cognitive objects’ because names and so on are *prapañca*: the old example of a chariot being nothing above a name assigned to parts arranged chariot-wise illustrates this point. Entities are reifications, they are semantic constructions assigned to conceptual constructions that occur through cognitive processes. The claim here is not that things *do not exist*. Instead, the claim is that we invest things with a sort of existence that they do not actually have. Things do not exist *the way we take them to exist*. Every part of every entity has innumerable causes and conditions – we do not see this reflected in language or the usual ways of thinking about the world. We invest them with permanence: a chariot is just a chariot, with some *svabhāva* indicating as much. For thinkers like Nāgārjuna, it is fine to refer to a chariot, but we must recognise that this is a conceptual construction referring

underlying point is then that conventional thought is everyday thought, and everyday thought is in some way mistaken: namely insofar as it tends to reification and conceptual proliferation (*prapañca*). At MMK 24.16, Nāgārjuna specifies exactly how this conventional thought manifests itself: as taking existents to have *svabhāva* and thus be intrinsically real. This in turn, says Nāgārjuna, means that conventional thought – thought that reifies – takes objects to be without causes and conditions (*ahetupratyaya*). It is an uncritical mindset, a way of thinking about and engaging with the world; a way that is that is mistaken.

It is here that we see the import of *referring to* an ultimate truth: it allows a clear demarcation between thought processes, an old way of seeing things (conventional) and a new way of seeing things (ultimate). It might help for us to think of *śūnyatā* as an ultimate truth when we are caught up in conventionalities and are ascribing *svabhāva* to that which lacks *svabhāva*: it stands as a ‘higher’ principle on the road to liberation precisely because clinging to notions of ‘self’ via intrinsic nature is the nexus of all dissatisfaction. This being the case, we can likely characterise use of the two truths as part of the Buddha’s skilful means (*upāya*), as a raft that helps us cross the proverbial river, but is of no further use when we get across the river and stand at the foot of the mountain. Nāgārjuna, I think, would have seen the two truths in a similar manner – he cannot uphold an ultimate truth if he is to remain consistent. It seems to me that to understand the two truths is to see them as handy ways of demarcating higher and lower levels of teachings that lead to better or worse ways of engaging with the world. In this sense,

to a collection of dependent causes, conditions and parts. In this sense, it is conventional. It is also in this sense that it is a ‘cognitive object’. The way we think a chariot exists is owing to a mistaken way of thinking about the world and the phenomena that interact within it. Precisely because there are no *svabhāvas*, there are no independent entities. The thought that there *are* independent entities is exactly that: a thought.

we might think of things termed ‘ultimate truths’ as penultimate teachings! They are the best of conventional understanding, but are still themselves somehow inadequate – they are not the final step, but they are about all we can say before *taking* a final step. Nāgārjuna is quick to point out that we must reach liberation via recourse to the conventional (*MMK* 24.10),¹⁹¹ the worldly means that surround us and that we make use of, the most basic of which is language. This means that we might class conventional truths as the ‘normal’ way of engaging with the world, and ultimate truth as a type of *upāya* that is useful to us, but which is in the final analysis – insofar as there is one – to be abandoned as mere concept.

Recall that Buddhists from the Abhidharma onwards account for experience via *dharma*s: I have elsewhere covered the intricacies of how *dharma*s were thought by the Ābhidharmikas to operate, and so will not retrace those steps here. Instead, I offer two final *kārikās* from Nāgārjuna providing the bedrock to the argument that all *dharma*s are empty and thus impermanent and so there cannot be any ‘ultimate’ entities. At *MMK* 25.22-23 we find:

*śūnyeṣu sarvadharmeṣu kim anantaṃ kim antavat /
kim anantaṃ ca nānantaṃ nāntavac ca kim //22//*

*kiṃ tad eva kim anyat kiṃ śāśvataṃ kim aśāśvataṃ /
aśāśvataṃ śāśvataṃ ca kim vā nobhayam apy atha //23//*

All *dharma*s [being] empty, what [is] without end? What has an end? /

What [is both] with end and without end; what [is neither] without end nor [having an] end? //22//

¹⁹¹ On this, Nāgārjuna writes ‘*vyavahāram anāśrītya paramātho na deśyate*’, which we can understand as something like ‘the ultimate truth is not taught detached from the world of appearances’, viz. liberation must be described, taught and reached in the conventional world. I think that this lends credence to the notion that for Mādhyamikas, conventional-ultimate distinctions are simply epistemological tools to aid us on the path rather than ontologically significant realms.

What is identical? What is different? What is eternal? What is noneternal? /
 What [is both] eternal and noneternal? What is neither (*na ubhaya*)? //23//

The point that Nāgārjuna is making is that given that all psycho-physical *dharma*s are empty of intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*), what sense does it make to talk about entities that are eternal, noneternal, both or neither? The question is itself mistaken; it is an instance of imposition, of conceptual proliferation (*prapañca*), and is ultimately a form of grasping that complicates the path to liberation. It seems clear then that Nāgārjuna does not see any value in positing an existent ‘ultimate’. ‘Ultimate’ is used to mark some distinctions when discussing a difficult subject, but when it comes down to it, there are no entities or states of affairs which fall under the concept ‘ultimate’. The ‘ultimate’ is a useful construction, designating the precipice at which linguistic designations and discursive cognition must end. It signifies the edge of the linguistic world. As with minotaurs and unicorns, it is important only that we understand what the concept means *in relation to* other concepts, in this case the ‘conventional’ and all that entails. It is *not* important that some entity or state of affairs actually fall under this concept.

This still sounds like a metaphysical claim, and to some degree, it is. But we are by this point at an advanced stage along the path, and this is important. At this stage, Nāgārjuna is toying with metaphysics in order to demonstrate the futility of doing metaphysics. When he asks ‘what is identical, what is different? What is eternal, what is non-eternal?’ and so on, Nāgārjuna is doing much more than engaging in mere sophistry. These questions ought to apply to *everything*, and the resulting *reductio* so advocated by commentators like Candrakīrti should lead us to stop asking metaphysical questions *in toto*. This is a controversial thesis, with many scholars

arguing that Nāgārjuna advocates nihilism, or that he ends up at some metaphysical viewpoint somewhere down the line, but I think that both of these positions are wrongheaded. We can see very clearly that Nāgārjuna does engage in some metaphysics, but he only engages with metaphysics insofar as he is required to in order to prove the silliness of metaphysical systems.

Accordingly, the metaphysical requirement upon Nāgārjuna really extends only as far as jettisoning certain commitments and ideas that get in the way of our liberation. This can be seen with Nāgārjuna's insistence that emptiness itself must be empty, a tactic clearly aimed at halting any possible reification of *śūnyatā* as an ultimate entity. Further than this, Nāgārjuna wants to halt *all* conceptual thought. We see at *MMK* 25.24 that 'the extinguishing of all cognition, the extinguishing of reification, is blissful', and at *MMK* 27.30 that the Buddha taught the 'true *Dharma (saddharma)* for the abandonment of all views' (*sarvadṛṣṭiprahāṇāya*). The ultimate is a view; it is descriptive not insofar as it designates some ultimately real state of affairs, but insofar as it describes the means by which the practitioner might reach the penultimate stage to liberation. Counter-intuitively, the final stage must be the disregarding of concepts of 'ultimate' and so on, so that no concepts at all remain.

Even the Four Noble Truths are only conventionally true, being relevant to us at all only as long as there is origination, cessation and so on (*MMK* 24.40).¹⁹² No Noble Truth is true in and of itself, but instead emerges in reliance upon those things that cause it and otherwise affect it in some way. Should dissatisfaction not occur, then we do not need to account for its origination,

¹⁹² The truths being 1) dissatisfaction, 2) the origination of dissatisfaction, 3) the cessation of dissatisfaction, and 4) the means to the cessation of dissatisfaction

cessation or the means by which we might expedite its cessation. Once dissatisfaction dissolves, the Noble Truths no longer hold – how could they? Those that do not understand this type of intimate connection between *śūnyatā* and *pratītyasamutpāda* – a connection that precludes the existence of any and all ‘ultimate’ entities – are called ‘dull-witted’ (MMK 24.11; *mandamedhasam*) and ‘slow’ (MMK 24.12; *manda*).

Those of sufficiently sharp mind know, then, that there are no ultimate entities or states of affairs, and as such, no corresponding ultimate truths. This is how Nāgārjuna characterises his Middle Path: his position is between the extremes of ultimate existence and ultimate nonexistence. It is thus clear to me that Nāgārjuna could not possibly have endorsed any entity or principle analogous to the *ātman-Brahman*. This would be to reify *śūnyatā* and, as discussed earlier, to propagate one more insidious form of self-attachment, which has the unthinkable consequence of effectively negating Madhyamaka’s *raison d’être*. As we see at MMK 24.11, Nāgārjuna thinks that such a position would be advanced only by the dull-witted!

6.3 The Ultimate as a Conventional Designation

Ultimate truth, then, should be thought of as a type of *prapañca*, although a less damaging one than those that traditionally fall under the scope of the conventional. It is a concept under which nothing can fall if we are to account for change via emptiness, and it is a concept about which speculation is pointless once we reach the final stage of the path to liberation. It is an imposition with no reality of its own: like everything else, it must be dependently originated and relies for its communication upon conventional means of communication. This is of significance if we want to claim that Madhyamaka endorses a

permanent, immutable Absolute like the *ātman-Brahman*. Nāgārjuna is clear that we must jettison notions of ultimacy at MMK 25.19-24 and 27.29-30. Let us examine these *kārikās*.¹⁹³

At MMK 25.19-24, we find:

na saṃsārasya nirvāṇāt kiṃ cid asti viśeṣaṇam /
na nirvāṇasya saṃsārāt kiṃ cid asti viśeṣaṇam //19//

nirvāṇasya ca yā koṭiḥ koṭiḥ saṃsāraṇasya ca /
na tayoṛ antaraṃ kiṃ cit susūkṣmam api vidyate //20//

paraṃ nirodhād antādyāḥ śāśvatādyāś ca dṛṣṭayaḥ /
nirvāṇam aparāntaṃ ca pūrvāntaṃ ca samāśritāḥ //21//

śūnyeṣu sarvadharmeṣu kim anantaṃ antavat /
kim anantaṃ antavac ca nānantaṃ nāntavac ca kim //22//

kiṃ tad eva kim anyat kiṃ śāśvataṃ kim aśāśvataṃ /
aśāśvataṃ śāśvataṃ ca kim vā nobhayam apy atha //23//

sarvopalambhopaśamaḥ prapañcopaśamaḥ śivaḥ /
na kva cit kasyacit dharmo buddhena deśitaḥ //24//

There exists no difference whatsoever between *saṃsāra* and
nirvāṇa /

There exists no difference whatsoever between *nirvāṇa* and
saṃsāra //19//

The limit of *nirvāṇa* [is the] limit of *saṃsāra* /

There is not even the subtlest difference between them //20//

Views concerning [what is] beyond cessation, the end of the
world, and the perpetuity of the world /

depend on [views concerning] *nirvāṇa*, death, and the future
//21//¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ A couple of these *kārikās* have been mentioned elsewhere in this work. I hope that their repetition will be forgiven: the overall context is, I think, important.

¹⁹⁴ Siderits and Katsura (2013:303) translate '*nirvāṇa*, the future life, and the past life', stating that this *kārikā* relates to the Buddha's reluctance to answer questions regarding states of being following 'the cessation of such

All *dharma*s [being] empty, what [is] without end? What has an end? /

What [is both] with end and without end; what [is neither] without end nor [having an] end? //22//

What is identical? What is different? What is eternal? What is noneternal? /

What [is both] eternal and noneternal? What is neither (*na ubhaya*)? //23//

The extinguishing of all cognition, the extinguishing of reification, is blissful /

No *Dharma* [was] ever taught by the Buddha to anyone //24//

Nāgārjuna's style here can seem cryptic or confusing, but I think we can interpret it in a relatively straightforward way. First, Nāgārjuna denies the difference between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, which is not without controversy if you are a Buddhist that believes in some ultimate *nirvāṇa* realm to which entry is gained upon awakening! However, given that Nāgārjuna has by this point in the text spent so long arguing against the possibility of *svabhāva* (and so *svabhāvic* realms or entities), it is my contention that the best interpretation here is to take Nāgārjuna as denying the existence of an immutable, ultimately existent *nirvāṇa* realm. As *svabhāva* is the only way by which entities might exist ultimately, it makes no sense for us to say that *ultimately*, there is either *saṃsāra* or *nirvāṇa*. Their shared 'limit' is that they are both conventional: neither exists with *svabhāva*. In this sense then there is no difference between the two.

Next, we see that views regarding what is beyond *nirvāṇa*, about the perpetuity or finitude of the world and so on are thought by Nāgārjuna to be directly reliant upon views about

composite things as persons, whether the world is limited in space, and whether the world has limits in time.' Such questions presuppose and answer to whether or not *nirvāṇa* has a beginning and end.

nirvāṇa. Siderits and Katsura are in my opinion correct when they link this *kārikā* to the indeterminate questions that the Buddha famously refused to answer (2013: 303). If *nirvāṇa* has a beginning or end, then it follows that the other questions must also have discernible answers.

We find Nāgārjuna's answer to this underlying question at *MMK* 11.1:

*pūrvā prajñāyate koṭir nety uvāca mahāmuniḥ /
saṃsāro 'navarāgro hi nāsyādir nāpi paścimam //1//*

The Great Sage [has] said [that] the first point [of *saṃsāra*] cannot
be known /
Saṃsāra [is] without first and last, [it is] without beginning or end
//1//

The underlying point to all of this is that such questions – even if they could be answered – are mere distractions. The act of asking them in the first place is misguided: views regarding one thing depend on views regarding something else, depend on views regarding something else, and so the chain continues in a circle of dissatisfaction, never finding one single, ultimate source. It is pointless to look for a beginning or end within *saṃsāra*, and doing so causes nothing but anxieties related to wrong views. It is a waste of our energies to focus on these distractions precisely because even if they could be answered, the resulting knowledge would not aid our quest for liberation. Nāgārjuna spends a lot of time arguing against the possibility of real (intrinsically existent) stages of existence. Chapter 11 of the *MMK* is dedicated to demonstrating that there are no 'real' prior or posterior stages of *anything*. This is because for there to be real, distinct stages, we need to account for succession in time, which as Siderits and Katsura explain, cannot be explained 'without positing an absolute beginning, a posit which would be irrational' (2013: 127). Nāgārjuna thinks this to be the case first because his denial of *svabhāva* also means

a denial of absolutes, and second because positing such a thing would violate the laws of *pratītyasamutpāda*.¹⁹⁵

We see this point really forced in the following lines. Given that *svabhāva* is impossible and all *dharma*s are thus empty, it is nonsensical to talk about beginnings, ends and so on. All *dharma*s being empty, there can be no possibility of ultimately existent entities. Nāgārjuna had hinted at this in Chapter 7 when he wrote that given that conditioned (*dharma*s) are unestablished, unconditioned (*dharma*s) cannot be established either.¹⁹⁶ Thus, an underlying

¹⁹⁵ *MMK* 11.3-6 really spells this out. Briefly, the argument is that if there were a first birth that was uncaused by old age and death, then the traditional account of rebirth would be invalidated: birth would be causeless. Similarly, if old age and/or death were the first point in the series (of rebirths), then they too would be uncaused by birth and so ultimately uncaused. Nāgārjuna, like all Buddhists, thinks it nonsensical to talk of uncaused events or entities. Further, *pratītyasamutpāda* itself rules out the possibility of absolute uncaused beginning. This same argument must hold, thinks Nāgārjuna, for all phenomena and entities in all possible circumstances.

¹⁹⁶ *MMK* 7.33-34:

utpādasthitibhaṅgānām asiddher nāsti saṃskṛtam /
saṃskṛtasyāprasiddham ca katham setsyaty asaṃskṛtam //33//

yathā māyā yathā svapno gandharvanagaram yathā /
tathotpādas tathā sthānam tathā bhaṅga udāhṛtam //34//

[With] origination, duration, and dissolution not established, the conditioned
 [does] not exist /
 And [with] the conditioned not established, what unconditioned [thing can be]
 proven? //33//

Like an illusion, like a dream, like the city of the *Gandharvas*,
 thus origination, duration, dissolution [have been] declared //34//

substratum, permanent, immutable, pure and so on cannot exist. The very fact that there is change in the world precludes its existence. Indeed, at *MMK* 7.17, Nāgārjuna asks how any non-arisen entity (think of the *ātman-Brahman* here) can be said to come into being:

*yadi kaścid anutpanno bhāvaḥ saṃvidyate kvacit /
utpadyeta sa kiṃ tasmin bhāva utpadyate 'sati' //17//*

If any non-arisen entity somewhere exists, [that would] arise /
But [when such an entity] does not exist, how then [can an]
existent arise?

Siderits and Katsura point out that the idea at play here is that entities that have not yet arisen have some type of proto-existence where it 'exists' as an 'as-yet-unoriginated entity' (2013: 82); this is, of course, the sort of thing that the Sarvāstivādins believed as a result of their *dharma* theory. Nāgārjuna wants to know how an entity in a state of existential limbo can truly be said to arise given that origination is the coming into existence of that which did not exist – in any state – before. An action requires an existent thing, and so for something to arise in a real sense, it needs to already exist. But we have seen that only something new that did not exist in any state previously can arise, and so Nāgārjuna thinks that we cannot conclude that any *dharma* really arises (he makes this clear at *MMK* 7.29). It is important to realise that Nāgārjuna is not ever claiming that we do not experience origination, cessation and so on: he is instead disputing their *ultimate* existence. The counter-intuitive conclusion is that the fact that change, origination, cessation and so on are all experienced in the world means that they cannot exist ultimately; they cannot exist with *svabhāva*.

The Advaitin would respond that the *ātman-Brahman* *does not* come into existence. It simply *is* existence. I think that Nāgārjuna would find this sort of reasoning entirely

unsatisfactory: *pratītyasamutpāda* dictates that *everything* is subject to birth, decay, aging, and destruction, and we have seen that Nāgārjuna thinks that this holds from the top down and in every conceivable circumstance. This is why he has such a problem with *dharma*s as conceived as having *svabhāva*. We can deploy the argument from *MMK* 25.23 against the Advaitin *Brahman* view: given that Nāgārjuna has demonstrated that entities cannot exist ultimately, how can anything be described as eternal, non-eternal, both eternal and non-eternal, or neither? The *ātman-Brahman* cannot be conceived of in any sense – it is incoherent. Additionally, we saw Śāṅkara earlier claim that the existence of the *ātman-Brahman* is in the first instance attested by the *Upaniṣads*. I think it uncontroversial to say that Nāgārjuna would not find this compelling: although there is recourse to Buddhist scripture in every Buddhist sect including Madhyamaka, we can see that the *MMK* is concerned not only with repeating Buddhist doctrine, but with reconciling it with experience. The metaphysics that Nāgārjuna does engage in are based on experience: we see change, we can analyse causes and conditions and so on. This is a shared factor with Yogācāra. Nāgārjuna simply uses our experience of the world to demonstrate that clinging to metaphysical views (*dṛṣṭi*) is a source of *duḥkha*: this is the world, we are engaging with it in the wrong way when we impose all these metaphysical dogmas onto it.

Śūnyatā is not an entity that exists ultimately: it is itself empty of intrinsic existence, it should not be reified, and it describes a privation (of *svabhāva*), not an existent thing: the lack of *svabhāva* is not some inverse type of permanent character, for this would be to reify emptiness as a *svabhāva* in all but name. Reifying an empty concept is for Nāgārjuna still problematic insofar as doing so has the propensity to bring about insidious types of clinging (and thus dissatisfaction). It is clear to me that followed to its logical ends, Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka cannot in terms of the

conventional countenance the assertion of an immutable, necessary entity that is both the material and efficient cause of the world: it is simply an incoherence that tallies neither with experience nor with Buddhist doctrine. In terms of the ultimate, such a question cannot arise because all reification – indeed all conceptualisation – has ended. In such an instance, talk of an ultimately existent *ātman-Brahman* is obviously impossible. Talk of an ultimate *anything* is impossible.

Now to the final two *kārikās* of Chapter 27 of the *MMK*. The context of this chapter generally is ‘An Analysis of Views’, the views in question being those concerning past and future existence. Siderits and Katsura write that the thrust of the various arguments contained in the chapter are ‘meant to refute a wide variety of theories about the ultimate nature of reality. In each case a key assumption of the theory under attack [is] that there are things with intrinsic natures [*svabhāva*]’ (2013: 335). The outcome of the chapter appears to be the conclusion that emptiness precludes any ‘ultimate’ phenomena from existing. What does Nāgārjuna have to say on this? At *MMK* 27.29-30 we find:

*atha vā sarvabhāvānāṃ śūnyatvāc chāśvatādayaḥ /
kva kasya katamāḥ kasmāt sambhaviṣyanti dṛṣṭayaḥ //29//*

*sarvadṛṣṭiprahāṇāya yaḥ saddharmam adeśayat /
anukampām upādāya taṃ namasyāmi gautamam //30//*

So, since all existents are empty, where, to whom, which, for what reason would views such as ‘the eternal’ occur?

I pay homage to Gautama, who by means of compassion taught the true *Dharma* for the abandonment of all views.

Given that all phenomena are empty of *svabhāva*, there can from an ultimate perspective be no place, person, or reason in which, to whom, or according to which views such as eternalism

arise. Indeed, the views themselves are also impossible from an ultimate perspective. Of course, the 'ultimate perspective' is itself a mere designation, indicative of an advanced position on the Buddhist path, but not of the final destination. Holding that some sort of ultimate truth or ultimate reality is the outcome of the path would itself be a view, and as we see at 27.30, the *Dharma* necessitates the removal of *all* views. This total removal must include the view that there is an ultimate truth or an ultimate reality, even if this ultimate view is the only view held by a given person. Nāgārjuna's aversion to asserting any sort of ultimate is, I think, well founded. If there *is* an ultimate mode of existence or some ultimate truth that liberates, it would need to be permanent. It would, according to Nāgārjuna's account of ultimacy, need to exist with *svabhāva*; an immutable, unoriginated thing detached from dependent origination and untouched by the very causes and conditions which account for all Buddhist causation. This is precisely the sort of existence that is proposed for the *ātman-Brahman*. Despite its *ultimately* being beyond conceptualisation and beyond attribution, it is in every circumstance acknowledged as the totality of existence. It is literally responsible for everything, 'ultimate' in every sense of the word, and so despite being beyond conceptualisation and so on, it remains the ultimate 'object' of liberation. Even in the final analysis, it is there: it is, in fact, *all* that is there. I am not at all convinced that this is what Nāgārjuna was working toward when he wrote the *MMK*. I earlier discussed how in the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, Nāgārjuna refuted the notion that *pramāṇas* can be ultimately established (and in turn establish some sort of ultimate knowledge) because *nothing at all* can be ultimately established: I think that the same thread is woven throughout the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, too. There is one particularly telling *kārikā* at the end of *MMK* 10:

*ātmanaś ca satattvaṃ ye bhāvānāṃ ca prthak prthak /
nirdiśanti na tān manye śāsanasyārthakovidān //16//*

[Those who] proclaim the real nature of the *ātman* and separate
entities /

[we] do not consider experts in [the Buddha's] teaching //16//

This criticism is aimed in the *MMK* at the *pudgalavādins*, but I think that it can apply with equal force to those that would advance an *ātmavāda* (doctrine of *ātman*): is this not what Bhattacharya, Murti et al. are trying to do? The Advaitin project is to give an account of the *ātman* and its ultimate identity as a microcosmic instantiation of the *Brahman*. The vast majority of Advaitin literature is dedicated to orientating practitioners toward this truth or towards fleshing out the details regarding how they might best *try* to orientate practitioners towards this truth.¹⁹⁷ Intuitive knowledge of this ultimate identity is the liberating factor. Bhattacharya, as we have seen, thinks that a *śūnyavāda* (doctrine of emptiness) is equivalent in all but name to the *ātmavāda* of the Advaitins. I hope that my arguments throughout this work illustrate why this need not be the case.

What is left after all this? For Nāgārjuna we have seen that the end result needs to be the extinguishing of *all* cognition; the extinguishing of *all* reification. This, as I have said, must include any notions around what is 'ultimate', be that in truth or in existence. Once we have reached this point, talk of ultimate truths or ultimate existence are seen for what they are, mere *prapañca*, hindering the pursuit of liberation by providing an idea to cling to (*vikalpa*). We must remove this final obstacle so that we might experience what Huntington (2018: 18) calls the

¹⁹⁷ Even the dry philosophical discussions about *pramāṇas* and epistemological principles is geared toward providing reliable means by which a dedicated practitioner can analyse the world to come to know *Brahman*.

‘consequent immersion in a groundless state of non-abiding—what is referred to in the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā as the “extinction of conceptual diffusion in emptiness”.’ I think that this is for Nāgārjuna as for Vasubandhu a state to be experienced in meditation. The halting of cognition (which constitutes liberation) necessitates the abandonment of views regarding the ultimate precisely because we could feasibly hold no attachment at all other than the attachment to the ultimate truth (as we conceive of it). This is still an attachment, and it still has the potential (or, I suggest, its inevitable consequence is) to breed the usual anxieties and *duḥkha* in the usual manners.

Given what has been said above, we eventually need to jettison our concept of ultimacy, lest we find ourselves clinging to it, surreptitiously sating a reified enquiring ‘I’, the ‘I’ that we think holds this truth to *be* ultimate in the first place, and so we end up prolonging our own *duḥkha*. For this reason, ‘ultimate truth’ must be a conventional construction. It is undoubtedly a useful concept, but only up to the point where we no longer need it to distinguish better ideas from worse ideas. When we reach that summit of practice where all ideas are to be eschewed and all discursive cognition is to be discarded, we have no place for any idea at all, not even of an ultimate truth. To keep such an idea is to attach oneself to it, to identify with it, and thus to allow a more insidious dissatisfaction. Nāgārjuna’s method must culminate in a disregarding of the concept of ultimacy, and with it, a disregarding of any notion of *ātman-Brahman* as our reality. We should not concern ourselves with such pointless questions as ‘what is reality?’, we should instead just *experience* without grasping and without reification. As such, ‘ultimate’ is a conventional designation; a useful fiction which can help our soteriological aim, but which is not sufficient to provide that same salvation. It is a tool that, like the fabled raft, helps us across the

river, but prevents us from traversing the mountain. It is my belief that Nāgārjuna recognised this, and that the method presented in the *MMK* is intended to deal with this most insidious of problems. It is in this sense that I think we can stake the claim that – conventionally! – ‘the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth’.

Concluding Remarks

I have covered a lot of ground in this work – I nevertheless hope that I have maintained a common thread throughout. I stated at the beginning that my intention was modest; simply to demonstrate that absolutism need not be a conclusion of Mahāyāna philosophy. My arguments have been mostly small, but aimed at several smaller targets, each of them different aspects within the Buddhist corpus. I think this reflects the nature of diversity within the field that we might broadly call ‘Buddhist philosophy’. All of my small arguments nevertheless add up to one overarching point: Mahāyāna philosophy – or at least some of the greatest examples of it – need not result in some type of absolutism. If I am *wrong*, then it is not an exaggeration to claim that 2000 years of Buddhist praxis and philosophy has been significantly misguided. The stakes are – in principle – rather high.

I have not covered in detail the ways in which some Buddhists do indeed endorse and propagate absolutism. There are a couple of reasons for this, the first being that I think we can take it for granted that this *does* happen, but not that it *should* happen. Second, I fear that such a gargantuan task is just too large for me to have attempted here. Instead, I have tried to maintain a relatively narrow focus on how we might avoid absolutism in the vein of Madhyamaka, Yogācāra, and even according to some *prajñāpāramitā* philosophy. It is in any case true that some Buddhists do indeed buy into forms of absolutism, and if Bhattacharya had simply stated this and stopped there, then I would have been in full agreement with him. The issue as I see it is that going by the arguments presented in the 2015 translation, Bhattacharya thinks that *all* Buddhists should endorse absolutism, and those that do not simply misunderstand the point of Buddhism! I hope to have demonstrated within this work that Bhattacharya (and scholars that

follow his lead) are mistaken on some fundamental points. Linguistic interpretations of awkward Sanskrit terms aside, I think that the bases of both Yogācāra and Madhyamaka are fundamentally opposed to the endorsement of an Absolute substratum. This is what I would say constitutes the real backbone of this work.

My main point, then, is that neither Vasubandhu nor Nāgārjuna would endorse the ultimate existence of the *ātman-Brahman*. But there is more! They would not argue for its ultimate non-existence, either. This is because, I have argued, that questioning non-existence, existence, possible existence and so on is little more than an exercise in dissatisfaction. For Nāgārjuna, our problems are – in the vast majority of cases – analysable down to belief in entities that are self-existent, or that have intrinsic nature. It is a predilection to thinking that objects have *svabhāva* that is the nub of the problem. This not only applies to Hindu thinkers like Śaṅkara, who would hold that the *ātman-Brahman* is the *svabhāva* of the universe and all it contains, but also to other Buddhists, who think of entities as conditioned, but conditioned by unconditioned, intrinsically existent atoms or *dharma*s. To be intrinsically existent is to have a *svabhāva*, and to have a *svabhāva* is to exist ultimately. Nāgārjuna thinks that all entities are empty (*śūnyatā*) of *svabhāva*, and so Nāgārjuna is thus concerned with denying the possibility of ultimacy from the very beginning. We saw in the VV that contrary to Śaṅkara, Nāgārjuna does not think that any ultimate entity whatsoever can possibly be established.

I have also interpreted the Yogācāra of Vasubandhu in a similar manner, arguing that despite formulating a *trisvabhāva* doctrine, he too views *svabhāva* as *parikalpita*. This is, I argue, because the way in which Vasubandhu formulated the *trisvabhāva* doctrine precludes us from

taking *svabhāva* to be an ultimately existent thing. That we must now understand *svabhāva* to be a tripartite, dependent concept proves that it cannot be the unitary, self-sufficient entity that it is sometimes taken to be. It is necessarily dependent and is a simple conceptual imposition. Far from endorsing some permanent existent, then, I argue that Vasubandhu seeks to liberate the mind from conceptual proliferation in much the same way as Nāgārjuna: by providing a method that will allow the practitioner to see that there are no permanent, immutable self-sufficient entities. This clearly rules out the prospect of an *ātman-Brahman*, transcendent or not.

Having disposed of the problematic issue of *svabhāva* (and with it, permanent, ultimate existence), I turned to non-existence. For Nāgārjuna and for Vasubandhu, it is the case that staunchly preaching that *x* and *y* do not ultimately exist is equally as problematic as claiming that *x* and *y* do ultimately exist. I propose that both must then jettison ultimate non-existence in the same way that they jettison ultimate existence. What we are left with is a denial of ultimacy on either side, which I think constitutes Nāgārjuna's 'middle way'. More than this, we have a total rejection of metaphysics, a point made most forcefully on the part of Nāgārjuna. I suggest that both Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu share a distaste for ultimacy: Nāgārjuna to the point that he will not even talk about it, and wants to halt all conceptual proliferation, reification and grasping at the world. For Vasubandhu, the point is realising the emptiness of the flux. He is more comfortable speaking of metaphysics and metaphysical concepts, just as long as we realise that they are – when all is said and done – empty of intrinsic existence. What is important is removing conceptualisation from consciousness, so that we might experience emptiness. That is to say that Vasubandhu believes that in following the Yogācāra, we realise that our experiences are empty of intrinsic nature and of ultimate existence, non-existence and so on. For the Yogācārin,

we ought to experience without grasping, without system building, and without imposing a metaphysic. This is, I think, largely the same for the Mādhyamika. The result then is a realisation that is all but identical in both cases. The difference is the method used to achieve it. What is clear in both cases is that there is no room for an *ātman-Brahman* and as such, that Bhattacharya's thesis is – in these two cases – mistaken.

Given that the initial claim made by Bhattacharya was that the Mahāyāna put things right in terms of reorientating Buddhist praxis back toward the *ātman-Brahman*, it is, I think, sufficient for me to demonstrate not that the *entire* Mahāyāna corpus runs contrary to Bhattacharya's thesis, but only that *parts of it* do. I hope that I have shown in the preceding chapters that the two significant Mahāyāna schools under discussion are those parts. I have supplemented my arguments for this with some peripheral challenges to Bhattacharya's choice of citations (the *prajñāpāramitā* literature, for example). Whilst I believe that these aid my overall argument, they are but small additions. My claim is then that Madhyamaka *should not* endorse absolutism, and Yogācāra *need not* endorse absolutism. According to my interpretations of both Madhyamaka and Yogācāra, then, absolutism need not be a conclusion of Mahāyāna philosophy.

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